The pen is the tongue of the mind.
Miguel de Cervantes

Many people hear voices when no-one is there. Some of them are called mad and are shut up in rooms where they stare at the walls all day. Others are called writers and they do pretty much the same thing.
--Meg Chittenden

The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.
Dr. Seuss

Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you're doomed.
Ray Bradbury

The Writer's Craft

Teaching Creative Writing:
A workbook for teaching effective writing techniques to middle and high school children
Instead of the traditional copyright message here, I just wanted to insert an appeal to your conscience. I am not a large corporation, but a writer, a freelance editor and a homeschooling mom of four. If you share this book with others, you decrease my sales and my ability to feed my family. The price of the book is minimal and I’d appreciate your referrals immensely. But please don’t share it with your friends.

Thanks,

Sherry Wilson
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Introduction

Why am I writing this book?

I am not a trained educator. I have no degree in teaching children or teens. I have no expertise in teaching children at all.

So, what could possibly inspire me to write a book on teaching creative writing to children? And what makes me think that I’m qualified to do so?

The inspiration came in the form of an inquiry from a teacher who was browsing my website. She asked if I had any advice for someone who had been assigned a teaching position for a creative writing class for which she was unprepared. She’d never taught it before. After we shared a few emails through which I gave her some advice, she suggested an ebook for teachers in her situation. Some of the mothers in my homeschooling group have suggested courses or some form of help in teaching their own children to write as well. At first I wasn’t sure for the reasons I addressed above, but the idea grew into this short workbook and I thought, why not?

It is true that I’m not a teacher. But I am a freelance writer and editor. I’ve taken a few great writing courses including two, yearlong courses on writing for children. I’ve had some short stories and articles published in magazines such as, Wee Ones and Highlights for Children. I teach an evening course in novel writing at the local college and I homeschool my four children. So, while I’m not professionally trained, I do think I have some experiences to share that might enlighten or inspire you to try something new with your students.

And there is something more that I can bring to the table—my own experiences. I have always been a writer. In the beginning there were little picture books that I made for my mother and tied together with yarn. Throughout school I had a few encouraging teachers who really helped to make me realize that I had talent, but there were also setbacks in school—things that kept me from reaching my potential. So I share with you here the things that I wished I’d learned in creative writing class in the early grades as well as things that I had to unlearn when I wanted to become a professional writer.

This book is a collection of information for the teacher or parent and exercises that I’ve collected and invented over the past ten years.
Introductory Exercise

This first exercise is designed for a classroom where the students don’t know each other well. The most important thing with a group of young writers is that they feel comfortable with one another so that they can share their writing and not feel like they’ll be judged for it. One of the exercises I always start off with in a new class is this.

- Write down three facts about yourself. One of them should be the truth and the other two should be lies. Now break up into groups of four or five and read them to each other. Each person should read and the group should try to guess which one is the truth. Make your lies convincing.

I like this exercise because it tends to loosen people up and lets people get to know one another better. It also drives home the point that fiction is a lie and to be a good writer, you have to be a convincing liar. Of course it isn’t as useful for the homeschooler where the children already know each other well.

Voice

Voice is one of those intangibles that is difficult to define. It cannot be taught, but it can be learned. The main issue is trust. The students must trust that the natural voice that they hear in their head as they read—the voice that they speak with—is okay. They can’t be worried about whether they can use more advanced vocabulary or if what they’re saying is right. The voice of a story is all about letting go of expectations and letting the story flow.

Voice can change from one story to the next as the writer becomes more adept. But the first stories should be written with the writer’s natural voice. Writing is visual in that we are reading words on a page, but it is also an auditory art. We read stories to our children or listen to readings on the radio. We hear a voice reading a story to us in our mind while we read—at least I do, though that might not be much of an endorsement as I never claimed to be normal.

So, while this is impossible to teach, you can help the student to let her voice come through her writing by assuring her that she won’t be judged by the number of big words that she uses. Her writing should sound similar to the way she would talk. If
she has trouble with this, she should tell the story orally into a recorder and then play it back to write it down.

Some kids stiffen up when they sit down to write. It doesn’t feel natural. They know their writing is stilted, but they can’t seem to overcome it. This is sometimes due to the demands we put on them when writing essays or reports and even short stories. Every teacher has his own requirements for these things and it is often a lot for a young person to keep in mind as they sit down to write. If this happens, you need to do something to get the student to loosen up and let go of all the expectations.

Writing prompts are helpful in this endeavour.

**Exercises to Help Discover Natural Voice**

The idea here is free writing. You set a timer for 10 minutes (or however long you want to give) and the students just write, using the writing prompt. They aren’t to worry about spelling or grammar. You can give them a minute or two to think about how they’ll approach the prompt and then they just write. It’s best if they are writing for the whole 10 minutes and not stopping to think about what they are writing. I know that sounds silly, but for these exercises, the less thinking, the better.

1. Remember a time when you did something to get noticed. Write about it.

2. Come up with 10 reasons you might skip having a bath for a whole week.

   a. Write a scene involving one of them.

3. What is the biggest lie you’ve ever told? Write about it. If you’ve never lied, make one up, pretend.

4. List 15 things you’ll never do. Pick one and write a scene where your character does this. What would drive someone to do it?
5. Write 250 words from the point of view of a ball of yarn being chased by a cat.

6. In 200 words, describe a hot day.

7. Write a fictional, scary encounter with your hairdresser/barber.

8. “I’d walk a mile for a...” continue writing.

9. Start a scene with, “Three empty cans of Dr. Pepper later...”

10. A computer malfunctions and traps 400 people in a small department store. Write the scene from the point of view of any one person in the store.

11. Begin with: “She touched the little box in her pocket and smiled.”

12. Your character’s little brother gets hold of a valuable CD. Write the scene.

13. “I could just make out the windows high in the castle wall...”

14. “She ducked as the plate smashed against the wall behind her...”

15. “My hand trembled as I punched the number into the phone...”

16. “The chattering birds made her smile, until she heard a growl...”

17. “It wasn’t going to be easy, but somehow she had to confront her mother...”

18. It all started when that doll came in the mail...

19. Write a story of a disastrous family picnic.

When you discuss or evaluate the pieces they’ve produced from these prompts, be careful not to point out spelling or grammatical errors. Don’t concentrate on sentence structure. Instead, focus on sound. Either get the children to read their piece out loud or have them trade with another student and have them read each other’s piece. You are looking for a smooth sounding voice—something that sounds natural—something that flows. If a piece sounds stilted, suggest that the writer use longer sentences. If it sounds like one long, run-on sentence, suggest they mix it up with some long and some shorter sentences.
The most important thing to take away from this exercise is that writing isn’t so much a visual art, but an auditory one. When we read, even to ourselves, we hear a voice in our heads reading the story for us. Reading aloud is the best editing tool available to any writer of any age.

**Point of View**

Choosing the point of view for your story is one of the most important things you will do in your planning. In today’s novels there are so many options available to the writer, yet few have a true understanding of all the intricacies of viewpoint and how it impacts the story. In the short story, there usually isn’t time for multiple viewpoints, so it’s best to stick with one character and everything in the story should be filtered through this viewpoint character. The following is some information to help you understand point of view better and how it works to create the connection between the character and the reader.

The discussion of point of view (POV) is one of the touchiest craft-debates among writers and editors.

Artists don’t generally like “rules” and so they balk when you tell them not to write in first person present tense because it is too hard to sell—or that they shouldn’t use the omniscient viewpoint because it simply isn’t done very often these days. As a writer myself, I can understand these feelings. I want to stretch my abilities and try different styles and forms. I don’t want to feel hemmed in by a bunch of rules. In fact, if there are a lot of rules, I’m apt to start thinking of ways to rebel.

Yet as an editor I can see the other side of the coin as well. Editors have seen omniscient viewpoint done poorly more often than not. True omniscient is very hard to do well. Yet there is no denying the mastery of Joseph Conrad, who wrote books in which the point of view might change with each sentence, sometimes five times in one paragraph. In most instances, the effect would be dizzying, but Conrad could pull it off so that you always knew who was talking and it felt perfectly natural.
Like all writing rules, choosing your point of view is not set in stone. So feel free to break the rules, but be sure that whichever POV you choose it is the one that makes the most of your story. And never forget that story is everything to the reader.

The key to making an informed choice as to which viewpoint is best for your story is information. You need to understand thoroughly how your choice of POV will impact your story.

We often hear of point of view referred to by the pronouns we use to tell our story—first, second and third person.

But that isn’t the only choice to be made. You must also choose your viewpoint character or characters and their perspectives in the story.

After all, your choice will determine the slant and style of your entire story. Cinderella would be a very different story told from the viewpoint of one of the step-sisters or the step-mother. Think of your viewpoint character as the filter that your story must pass through to get to the reader. Which filter will best enhance your story? Keep in mind that the viewpoint character isn’t always the protagonist—i.e. The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald or the Sherlock Holmes books.

**First Person Point of View**

When you tell a story through a viewpoint character using I or we, you are using first person point of view.

*Example: The banging on my door reverberated within my skull like a giant church bell in an empty hall. I groaned and rolled onto my stomach, pulling the pillow over my head.*

Every detail of your story must be filtered through your viewpoint character. If your viewpoint character cannot see, hear, touch, smell, taste, think, know or feel it, you can’t include it. Therefore, if you want to introduce something outside the range of your main character, you have to use another character’s words or actions rather than their internal thoughts to convey the information you want the reader to have.

First person point of view is the most reader friendly. It’s intimate. The reader feels like the character’s best friend. In fact, the viewpoint character will often confide in
the reader things he wouldn’t tell his best friend. This can be a comfortable point of view as it allows the writer to get right into the character’s head; however, beginners often find first person deceptively easy. It seems the simplest way to tell the story but it can be challenging because you really need to understand your character and his role. And you can’t use language that your character wouldn’t use or describe things that your character wouldn’t notice.

The most common problem when using first person POV is that it is difficult to resist the urge to *tell* the reader everything rather than *show* it. It can also be frustrating to be trapped in one character’s head for 50,000 + words. This sort of forced closeness can breed boredom if not contempt, which is particularly problematic if your character is a thinly disguised version of yourself.

Even if you choose another point of view in the end, I always find it helpful to write a couple of scenes in first person as an exercise to really get into my character’s head. Many authors suggest it is helpful to write your first chapter from several points of view before you settle on the POV which is most comfortable for you as a writer and also most effective for your story.

**Considerations:**

First person seems like the easiest viewpoint to write from, but looks can be deceiving. There are many things to consider before you begin to write.

**Genre**

Genre can have an impact on the POV you choose. First person stories generally fall into one of following genre categories:

- Most young adult fiction (12 and up)-YA is a particularly amazing market for those who like to experiment and push the boundaries. Teens are receptive to something new and different.
- Short stories
- Literary fiction
- Mainstream (usually women’s fiction)
- The recently labeled Gothic genre
Of course you can use first person in any genre but these are the most common.

**Things to Keep in Mind**

You need to maintain the character’s voice throughout. Remember, it is the character doing the narration, not the author. That means you cannot say things or notice things that the viewpoint character wouldn’t say or notice. For example, it might be out of character to have a macho biker gang member describing the daisies and buttercups by the roadside when you are setting the scene.

- The voice of the narration should be consistent with the character’s cultural, social, educational and regional background. Don’t make your uneducated janitor talk like a doctor. This makes your character believable.

- The voice itself is important as well. There is a fine line between unique and annoying, not to mention the current obsession with political correctness. Would you like to read an entire novel written in heavy dialect—say valley girl speak? Or Newfoundland dialect?

- This can be a great opportunity for the creative writer as word choice can reveal a lot about a character.

- Character is shown not only through dialogue, but also through narration. You need to be careful that the reactions and personality of the viewpoint character don’t disappear at emotional moments in the story. Don’t let your first person story turn into simple observation (Show don’t tell!). The character needs to react to the events physically and verbally—not just narrate the reactions of others.

**Benefits**

So why would anyone choose first person point of view?

First person creates an intimate perspective. The reader’s vicarious experience is heightened by the tightly focused perspective created when everything is being filtered through the viewpoint character. This is particularly attractive to young readers who can easily see themselves ‘in’ the story.

It can open up some interesting plot possibilities as the narrow viewpoint can hint that things aren’t what they seem, allowing for plot twists later on.
It can be a lot of fun to write as the author gets to ‘live’ the story through another set of eyes.

**Second Person Point of View**

Telling a story using **you** is called second person point of view. Using this viewpoint, you control all of the information and give the reader whatever you want.

**Example:** “You open your eyes and the sun is already high in the sky. You’ve slept away the whole morning. You roll over on the hot sand, scrambling to your knees. The events of last night come rushing back to you…”

Very little fiction is written in second person with the exception of “choose your own adventure” types of books, or books about psychosis. Authors sometimes use it to good effect in a short story, but it’s very rare to see it in a full length novel. But it is a popular style for a lot of non-fiction, self-help books, and tourism ads.

It often has a jarring effect in fiction and is the least popular viewpoint. Your reader picks up a book to escape into another character for awhile and using “you” destroys this illusion. And it just feels weird—as though you are being bossed around with someone always telling you what to do and feel.

**CONSIDERATIONS:**
Second person point of view is certainly the most rare and most difficult to use viewpoint, but there are instances when you may find beneficial to your story.

**GENRE**

Genre often has an impact on your choice of viewpoint. There are few genres which use second person.

- choose your own adventure books
- video games
- self-help books
- short pieces called POV stories
- short stories
• travel articles
• An introduction or preface to your book where the character is talking specifically to the audience.

**THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND**

I often see the writer use second person to address the audience directly, unexpectedly in the middle of the story. This generally results in a viewpoint breach and should be avoided. It pulls us out of the story and makes us wonder who just spoke to us. It reminds us that we are still reading a story, when really, you want your reader to be lost in the story and forget that he/she is reading.

So why would anyone want to write in second person point of view?

Until recently I would have said, never. But there are instances when you need to make an impression on the reader. One of my students used it in the opening chapter of his book to forcefully put the reader in the protagonist’s shoes. It was extremely well done and came off with a *Wonder Years* type of feel to it. So I take back my answer and say that second person does work in rare instances, when handled well. It is not something I’d recommend for the beginning writer though as it’s very hard to keep up consistently.

**Third Person Point of View**

Third person point of view is by far the most common choice. It uses the third person pronouns he, she and they to tell the story.

Example: “As *they* followed Charlie through the crowded maze, *Jake* felt an odd excitement building inside him—or was it fear? *He* tried to grab Sophie’s hand, but *she* slapped him away. *He* had promised Grandpa he’d look after her. A pang of guilt stabbed him. *He* should have at least left a note for Grandpa. It wasn’t fair to make him worry about them when he had so much else on his mind. Ever since *they’d* moved to Fillmore, *Jake* had felt like everyone was waiting for him to mess up and *he* had done his share of proving them right. *He* promised himself that this time *he* wouldn’t let Grandpa down. It was *his* responsibility to get Sophie home safely and *he* would do just that.”

There are many variations of third person point of view which have to do with the perspective of the viewpoint character.
CONSIDERATIONS:

Third person is the most common point of view in all genres except young adult fiction where first person is more common. It is the viewpoint that we are most familiar with as readers and so the transition to writing third person is quite natural. It is easiest to write in the style that you read most often. If you read a lot of third person fiction, then that will be the easiest viewpoint in which to write.

The most important thing to remember when writing any viewpoint is consistency.

BENEFITS

With third person point of view, you have many options as you choose your viewpoint character(s). You can keep it almost as personal as first person viewpoint by choosing to tell the story through the eyes of just one character. Or, you can tell the story in a more distant fashion as if you are watching a movie. How close the viewpoint is depends on how much of the character’s internal thoughts and feelings you reveal. You can even choose two or more characters to tell your story and rotate from one to another.

This is the most commonly accepted viewpoint and it makes it a bit easier when it comes time to sell your writing. Though this is a marginal consideration and all choices should be made for the sake of the story.

You can also mix your viewpoints, using first person when you tell the story from one character’s POV and third person when in another character’s head. Justine Larbalestier uses this to good effect in her Magic or Madness trilogy.

It is helpful to understand the intricacies of how the different perspectives in viewpoint work as well as how third person point of view differs from omniscient point of view.

The possibilities are endless.

Perspectives in Point of View

In order to fully understand point of view, we need to explore the different perspectives from which a story may be told.
Major Character Viewpoint

The story can be told in first, second or third person but it is told by just one character—the main character or protagonist. The reader discovers everything in the story at exactly the same time as the viewpoint character does. You cannot hint at things that are to come if the main character doesn’t know they are coming. You cannot give the character unnatural foresight--unless of course he is psychic.

This is the most common viewpoint used in children’s literature and is used often adult literature as well. It allows you all the descriptive forces of third person and almost as much intimacy as first person. It is much easier to identify with just one character. The Harry Potter books are written in this viewpoint. It helps immensely with the mystery aspect of a story as the reader needs to keep in mind that a character is fallible and can misinterpret things. That makes it much easier for the writer to keep other characters’ motives hidden from the reader.

Minor Character Viewpoint

Again the story can be told in first, second or third person. It is told through only one character just like the example above-except it is told through a minor character. This technique is used in The Great Gatsby. Nick is merely an observer of the story, while Gatsby is the protagonist. In the Sherlock Holmes books, Watson is the viewpoint character while Holmes is the protagonist.

This method isn’t used very often in modern literature, but can be used to good effect in literary works where you need to keep some distance to really see what is happening. Or perhaps you need a more sympathetic character than your protagonist. Or perhaps you need to keep information that the protagonist knows from the audience in order to maintain an air of mystique as in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Or perhaps your protagonist is unreliable, so you need someone more stable as the viewpoint character—again the Sherlock Holmes stories come to mind.

Omniscient Viewpoint

Basically, omniscient point of view means that the story is told from a god-like, omnipotent viewpoint. You could use third or first person pronouns in the writing, with the third person being most common and perhaps least confusing. But, you are all-powerful and can choose to dip into the head of any of the characters and reveal things that have occurred in the past or will happen in the future.
This was once a very popular method of storytelling. It is less so now, especially in the North American market. Still there are some cases where this can add extra dimension to your writing when done well. Joseph Conrad was a master of omniscient viewpoint.

I do see this used poorly in a lot of romance fiction by popular authors like Danielle Steele. It drives me crazy as a reader though. I think I’ve made it through one Danielle Steele book and it was an exercise in discipline not to throw the book across the room. I would get into an emotional scene where the viewpoint character is thinking about how much of her life has been lost to being a mother and then we’d get a paragraph or two in the POV of the maid who is talking about how the woman looks. This is such a major turn off that I had to stop reading.

The trouble is that it is extremely difficult to do well. Each character must have a distinctive voice so that the reader is never at a loss as to whose head he is in at the moment. This is an interesting device for an epic novel which explores a theme with several tangled subplots. If you give away the wrong information (in other words if you tell us what we want to know) then you lose tension using this technique. But if you give away the right amount of information, you can increase tension considerably.

**Limited Omniscient Viewpoint**

As I mentioned, true omniscient viewpoint is very rare, but limited omniscient is more useful for most modern writers.

Limited omniscient basically means that while you have a God-like perspective of the story, you limit yourself to being in one character’s head at a time. It allows you to switch characters as many times as necessary, even within a scene, but it does so in a more controlled way.

If you think about true omniscient as having a camera panning throughout the room at a party scene, dipping into anyone’s head and perhaps more than one person at a time, by taking on the collective group perspective. You can think about limited omniscient more like handing a camera around the room from person to person.
Also, with limited omniscient viewpoint, the head hopping is made easier on the reader by anchoring us firmly in one head and then showing the transfer by physical contact. So you might start the scene in Joe’s viewpoint as he speaks with Rick and Sally. If you want to switch over to Sally’s thoughts in the conversation, you might have Joe place his hand on her shoulder and use that opportunity to lead into her viewpoint.

**Considerations**

True omniscient viewpoint is a difficult way to write your story. The limited omniscient makes it a bit easier, but it is not a choice for a beginning writer. It makes the story less intimate for the reader and that is pretty much the point of reading a story these days.

There was a time when a readership didn’t have a lot of other distractions like television, movies, video games, and the internet. These technological advancements have their advantages, but they have also made society more interested in immediate gratification.

In order to compete with these other demands on your reader’s time, you need to offer something that these other pass times don’t. Intimacy is really what the written story offers. It is more personal and more intimate. It allows you to become completely absorbed in another world for awhile.

If you use a method of storytelling like omniscient viewpoint that takes away from the intimacy, you need to see a real benefit in some other way by doing this.

So I would recommend that you begin with one of the other viewpoint choices. Use omniscient viewpoint carefully and be sure that your story really needs to be told this way before making the decision.

This is also not something that would be useful to a writer of short stories or even novellas. It is only really possible in a longer work of fiction—the novel.

**Multiple Viewpoints**

This is another popular viewpoint in stories today. The story is told by only one character at a time, but the viewpoint character switches between two or more characters throughout the course of the novel. This can be a very effective tool when used for the right reasons. It has to add something to your story to have it
told from different points of view because you lose intimacy by switching from one character to the next. So what are you going to gain from the switch to make up for it? Needed information? A different perspective to explore a good subplot? A chance to switch locations?

Incidentally, this is probably my favorite point of view to write in. You aren’t stuck with the same character throughout the entire story and you get to reveal the story from several different angles. This is a popular form in many genres including romance, horror, literary fiction, mysteries, and science fiction.

It needs to be done in a controlled way, by switching viewpoints with alternating chapters or scenes. It is more uncommon to switch in the middle of a scene, but when this is done well, it tends to backtrack slightly to retell the last action performed from the other perspective.

It is a great device if handled well. If you aren’t sure which perspective is best for a particular scene, write it in both perspectives and then pick the one that works best.

To add to the confusion, you can also mix points of view. For example, you might have three or four different viewpoints in a novel. You could use first person for the scenes in which your protagonist is the filter and then switch to third person for the other viewpoints as Justine Larbalestier does in her Magic or Madness trilogy. This gives us a clear first person connection with the main character and the added angles of other viewpoints in third person. It is a wonderful device.

Point of view is one of the most important tools for a writer and choosing the most effective POV can help you find the right voice for your novel. Consistency is the key point. Understanding the intricacies will help you avoid disturbing or confusing your reader.

Again, these multiple viewpoints are more for longer works of fiction where you have room to truly explore two or more characters and their impact on the story. But it is useful to know these things as it’s helpful to watch for when you are reading novels if you aren’t writing one at the moment.
Exercises for Increasing Awareness of POV

I’ve mixed the exercises here. Some of them work for all ages and others are more appropriate for teens. Use your own discretion and feel free to invent your own scene situations to use as prompts for these exercises.

I like to use fairy tales because everyone is familiar with them and they are skeletal enough that you can be creative with the story. There are so many modern interpretations of fairy tales in the movies these days. You can see how they take the basic story and deepen it by adding character arc. Just about any dramatic scene will do the job for the exercises.

The key is using characters that are unique enough that there will be a marked difference in the scene when told from the other viewpoint.

1. Imagine a scene from Snow White--perhaps when she first joins them or maybe when she falls into a deep sleep from the apple. Tell the scene from the POV of one of the dwarfs. Can you show which dwarf is telling the story without saying it outright? Bashful, Doc, Dopey, Grumpy, Happy, Sleepy and Sneezy.

2. Tell the story of Cinderella (or one of the major scenes) from the POV of one of the stepsisters. You could read one of the major scenes in Cinderella and then have the kids write it from a different viewpoint.

3. Create the scene. Amy and Jack are hiking in the woods when they come across a strange object...
   a. Tell the scene from Jack’s POV in third person
   b. Tell the scene from Amy’s POV in first person
   c. Which one was easier to write? Which one felt more natural?

4. Write the following scene. Luke leaves his fiancé, Natalie, at home as he travels to another realm—perhaps a sea voyage to another country or a voyage to a fantasy world. The trip is important and he can’t avoid it. While visiting this other world, he meets and marries Emily. He returns to his home with Emily. Natalie meets them at the dock, expecting to see her fiancé.
   a. Tell the scene from Luke’s or Emily’s viewpoint in first person.
   b. Tell the scene from Natalie’s viewpoint in third person.
   c. Tell the scene from a limited omniscient viewpoint.
d. Which one was the most fun to write? Which one is most fun to read?

5. Christopher and Gabrielle meet in Science class when they become lab partners. Write the scene in first person—once from Christopher’s viewpoint and once from Gabrielle’s viewpoint. Concentrate on the differences between boys and girls in the way that they think.

6. Take a scene from a book written in past tense. Rewrite it in present tense. How does that change the flavor of the story?

7. Take a scene from a story that is written in first person. Change it to third person. How does it change the feel of the scene? Now try writing it in second person. The key here is consistency. Which one was the easiest? Which was most difficult?

**Characters**

A well-written character is the most powerful force available to you as a writer. This is what initially hooks a reader in, and creates a lasting impression in fiction. We can all remember great characters from stories, sometimes more readily than the story itself.

In fact there are entire legions of fans of different series who are so enthralled with these characters that they write their own stories about them. *Harry Potter, Star Trek, Pirates of the Caribbean, Twilight,* and many others. Sometimes they write what they think, or hope, will happen in the series and sometimes they write entirely different stories, putting the characters in new situations. Some of these stories are 200,000 words or more. The characters have become so real and so deeply engrained that they almost live and breathe.

**What is it that makes these particular characters appealing?** What makes you feel like you know this person better than many of the real people in your life? What makes them linger in your mind long after the story is over?

**Real People**

You’ve heard it time and again—characters should be like real people. But think about that for a moment. Would you really want to read about the guy that lives in a typical neighborhood, goes to work, comes home, eats his dinner and watches TV
for the better part of the evening? I think not, unless something very exciting happens to him on the weekends.

If you think about the people who have made an impression on you in your life, you’ll see they aren’t the typical guy who lives across the street. There is something about each of them that makes them in your eyes, unique individuals—characters—just like characters in a book. **So while your characters need to have inherent truth in their actions and reactions—that which makes us feel they are not so different from us—they also need to have something extraordinary about them.** They need to be larger than life. They need to be, not what we are, but what we wish we could be.

That said, there are things about your characters that will make them feel real to the reader. One of those things is dialogue. Make a concerted effort to study the way people speak. Listen to public conversations—in restaurants, malls, fast food shops, parks, library, grocery store—wherever you go, eavesdrop. It is all in the name of research :). I won’t tell anyone.

**Become aware of how people speak to one another.**
- Are there particular words that the speaker uses more than others?
- Can you close your eyes and tell which of the members in the targeted group is speaking?
- Listen to the way teens talk to each other—how they talk to their parents or strangers.
- Listen to the way parents speak to their kids and how kids answer back.

Develop an ear for dialogue by listening to real people converse. You’ll be amazed at how much this helps your dialogue. I have been practicing this lately and I notice that my writing partner, who always rewrites all my dialogue, isn’t making as many changes.

Characters reactions must also ring true. I edit many stories where the writer seems reluctant to have their characters reason something out or to think about something, even if it is simply to reject the thought. It is important to stay inside the character’s head and follow their thoughts through. If some point needs to be made, or some objection spoken, the character must do so. If it is simply ignored, it makes the character seem dim-witted.
You wouldn’t believe how often this sort of thing happens in manuscripts. Don’t just let the dialogue speak for your character. Keep us in the character’s head and let us see the reasoning. It makes the reactions more realistic to the reader.

Creating Memorable Characters

If we want our characters to be memorable, we must expose what it is that makes them so. As writers, we need to first find, and then point out the extraordinary in ordinary people.

- **Strength**—we want to read about characters who have attributes we would like to possess—courage, stamina, insight, intuition, compassion, etc. Our protagonist especially needs to exhibit some strength of character that makes him exceptional.

- **Something special.** It comes back to the issue of strength—what is it about your protagonist that makes him suitable for the job at hand? Why wouldn’t someone else do just as well?

- There must be an **inner conflict** or **conflicting parts to their personality.** A character who exhibits nothing but strengths isn’t going to be interesting for long. Focus on some weakness or conflict within the character to let us know that they are in trouble or, if not yet in trouble, that it is on the way. We always want to hear the story of someone facing temptation or difficulty.

- The character must be **self-aware.** He must actively explore his feelings. If a turn of the plot comes and the character denies his feelings and says simply, “who cares?” there isn’t going to be much reason to keep reading. The characters have to be emotionally invested in the story and willing to explore that to some degree.

- Your character must **do more and say the things that we wouldn’t quite dare.** You’ve done it 100 times at least—thought of that perfect line long after the moment has passed. Here you control the moments. You can spend three days thinking up that perfect zinger—and you won’t have missed the opportunity to have your say. You control the time here. The moment doesn’t have to pass.
Character / Story Connection

So you’ve summed up the driving premise of your story in one word. How do you go from here to create meaningful characters? **Once you have your story premise in place, most of your characters should evolve naturally.** If you are to write a story about the power of love, then two characters will likely fall in or fall out of love, and perhaps another character could be added to create conflict. And you’ll also plan the obstacles which make their love impossible, for they must overcome impossible odds to prove love’s power. So at least some of your characters will be set by extrapolating your premise.

You must also choose your supporting characters. **Think of it as casting a play or movie.** Do you need a villain or a best friend? Who will amplify and contrast your character? Can you create subplots that will amplify or contrast your theme? For example, you might introduce a conflict-filled subplot that escalates the threat to the prospect of the two living happily ever after.

If we continue with our theme of love and we have those two people whose love will overcome all obstacles, then we could also have a jilted love interest—the character whose life is affected by love in a different way. So we learn that this love is precious—not something that everyone finds. Perhaps other subplots will look at love in different manners.

If you think of the movie *Love Actually*, you will see exactly what I mean. This features several stories of love—romantic love, sibling love, parental love, lost love, found love—all stages of love. The characters’ lives intersect and it shows how a large-scale, thematic, revolving viewpoint works, and works well.
Character Exercises

Try some of the following character exercises. Some of them are good for creating your characters and others will be better used once you've done some writing.

1. **Reread books** that you really love and notice how the author handles characterization and character description.

2. **Collect mannerisms**—as revealing on the printed page as they are in real life. Pick an emotion and track it in the people that you see for the next few days. Keep a notebook—a small one that you can carry in your pocket. No one will know what you are doing as you jot down a few notes in the grocery store lineup or while at dinner.
   - How do different people show that they are bored or try to hide it?
   - How can you tell when someone is impatient or irritable?
   - What about stronger emotions like fear, anger, love?

3. **Exploring Emotions**—studying body language. Put a list of emotions in a hat and have the kids act them out. Try to keep it realistic—something you’d see in real life, rather than a caricature of exaggerated actions. Can the other students guess the emotion? What body language gave it away?

4. **Write a description of someone you know well**. Then show it to someone else who also knows this person and see if they can recognize who it is. For a real challenge try a self portrait.

5. **Go shopping for your character** and pick out an outfit or two that they would love. You can give it to him without spending a dime. This will help you to make the character more real in your mind.

6. Actually buy a shirt or sweater that your character would love. Put it on when you write from that POV. This works well especially if your character is very different from you.

7. Pick a few different **words or phrases** that your character would use and use them yourself for a few days.

8. **Take a character you have that you feel may be stock (or stereotypical) and turn him around, making him do the opposite of what is expected.** —a teacher who refuses to teach or teaches misinformation, a firefighter who starts fires. Think about making your
characters rich with several dimensions. People do things that surprise you sometimes; your characters should as well.

9. **Write a letter** to your reader as if you were the character, using first person. This is my favorite way to get into my character’s head.

9. **Interview your character** as if you were on a radio talk show. You can even do this before and after the story occurs so you understand the impact the story has on your character.

10. **Cluster on a character.** If you want the character to be a computer programmer, you might get several ideas around that. Then expand on those ideas. But that will give you a fairly stereotypical image. Then take one of the elements and negate it. Say if this programmer loves his computer, negate that and say that he hates it. Now think about reasons why he might hate his computer. That brings a different angle to a stereotypical image.

11. **Pretend you are in a waiting room. Describe the people around you—focusing only on their feet!** Type of shoes, cleanliness and condition of shoes, toes if they show, how they let their feet rest. Are they quiet or do the feet move? What can you tell about the person from their feet?

12. **Describe your favorite food as if you are about to eat.** You have been very hungry all day and have not had time to sit down to eat. The smells coming from the kitchen of your favorite restaurant are incredible. Finally the waiter brings it to you and sets it in front of you. Describe it so that we can experience your joy while you eat it.
   
   - Now do the same exercise with the same food. Only this time you have ordered something else and received the wrong dish. And you find it repulsive. Make us feel that repulsion from your description without actually saying that you hate it.

13. **What is in your character’s refrigerator?** You can learn a lot about a character by the state of their fridge.

14. **Dream exercise:** A commonly used creative writing exercise is to create biographies or back stories for each character in your piece. Try this variation: write the recurring dreams of your four most significant characters.

15. **When your group is in a public setting (such as a coffee bar), pick one person in the room and have everyone in your group write a detailed description of that person, including both appearance and mannerisms.** Compare your descriptions to see what unique things each member noticed.
16. **Think of the one thing you always wanted to do** but never had the gonads, or skill, or funds for—let your character indulge and share the internal/external highs and lows with the reader.

17. **Picture your character**—collect pictures of people from magazines, catalogues or the internet. Pictures of actors work well because they often have many different looks for the different parts that they play. A picture will sometimes give me the personality of a secondary character.

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**Using Poetry to Explore Character**

I started this exercise because poetry was a requirement for the curriculum. But I've kept using it because I found it a useful way to explore character and theme. By concentrating on the poetic forms, you're able to see your story from different angles that you may otherwise overlook. I have included some examples drawn from my own story to show you what I mean. Obviously, you don’t have to be a poet to have fun with this.

**Cinquain:**

- **2 syllables** One word giving the title. (noun)
- **4 syllables** Two words that describe the title. (adjectives)
- **6 syllables** Three words that express action. (Verbs)
- **8 syllables** Four words that express feeling
- **2 syllables** One word that gives the title a different name or, repeat the title possibly using a synonym.

**Example—using my main character.**

Jake
brave, resourceful
running, fighting, riding
finding place of belonging
Jake
**Haiku:**
Japanese form of poetry, generally used with nature themes. Form requires 17 syllables in three lines with pattern:
- 5 syllables
- 7 syllables
- 5 syllables

**Example:** Again, thinking about my antagonist...

Shadow flashes past
vile, repugnant and alone
feasting on your soul

**Limerick:**
A limerick is a short, funny, often nonsensical poem with a specific rhyme and rhythm pattern.
- **Line 1.** 8-10 syllables rhymes with lines 2 and 5
- **Line 2.** 8-10 syllables rhymes with lines 1 and 5
- **Line 3.** 5-7 syllables rhymes with line 4
- **Line 4.** 5-7 syllables rhymes with line 3
- **Line 5.** 8-10 syllables rhymes with lines 1 and 2

**Example:** I have always been dreadful at these. 😊

There once was a boy who loved to ride trains,
Much train trivia lived in his brain,
Jake knew how much gold
The boxcar could hold
And he even liked riding in the rain.

**Rubai:**
The Persian word for quatrain, or four-line verse. The rubai is an ancient literary form the Persian poets have used to express their thoughts on diverse subjects. Because a rubai is so short and its rhyme scheme so restrictive, it often makes use of metaphor or imagery to express its meaning.
**Line 1.** rhymes with lines 2 and 4  
**Line 2.** rhymes with lines 1 and 4  
**Line 3.** usually does not rhyme  
**Line 4.** rhymes with lines 1 and 2

**Example:** thinking about my main characters journey

Bringing together a family that has lost its way  
Through time and space I must travel in a day  
To hell and back before the stroke of twelve  
To heal the cracks and finally have my say.

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**Acrostic**

Write your characters name vertically. Then write the lines of your poem, starting with the letters you have written. Each line can be a word, a phrase, or a sentence. I have chosen to do my character’s name. You could also choose the one word which represents the theme or heart of your story.

Journey through time and space  
Awakening a sense of purpose and belonging  
Keeping fast to convictions  
Enlightenment

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Collect pictures in a file on your computer—stuff from the internet, pictures of actors, actresses and creatures. You’re only going to use them to stir your imagination. Use the pictures in your character sketches. Sometimes a picture can give you insight into the character. One of my characters was developed almost entirely from her picture.

Here’s an example of a character sketch that I did from a novel that I’m working on.
A similar form, minus the pictures and with slightly different headings, is available to download at my website as well. www.the-writers-craft.com The website copies are pdf, so you’d have to print them off and fill them in.

**Dialogue**

**Dialogue is probably the most important craft element in writing fiction.** It can reveal so much about a character in a very small place. Watching the characters interact is what brings the story to life. But, the ability of the reader to get so much out of listening to your characters speak can also work against you.

It doesn’t take much more than a few lines for the reader to tell if your dialogue sounds right or not. **The reader may not be able to tell you what exactly is wrong with the dialogue, but he can tell that it is off, and that will lose him faster than anything else.** If your dialogue sounds stilted or just not natural, you’ve lost your reader before the story really gets started.

This ability of the reader to evaluate your dialogue in just a few lines and deem it acceptable or not is what makes many writers uncomfortable with writing it. But
avoiding dialogue isn't the answer. Your characters must interact to make the story believable and interesting. So what do we do?

Does making the dialogue sound real mean we should just record a conversation in a restaurant and transcribe it word for word? Well no! **Even natural sounding dialogue isn't the same as real speech.**

In a real conversation we ramble on until we get to our point and then we wander off topic several times and sometimes we don't even get back to our original point. And we make small talk, asking questions by rote and often times don't even listen to the answers. **But in a story, you simply can't afford to ramble. There's no room for small talk. Every line needs to have a purpose.** But for a line of dialogue this is especially true. **Every line of dialogue should show us something about the character and/or it should move the story forward.** There has to be a reason for it.

**So dialogue is essential to a story.** It isn't a skill that can be effectively taught. It is something that needs to come naturally--through **observation and listening.**

If you want to write better dialogue, you need to **actively listen to the way people speak.** Pay attention to what kids sound like when they talk to each other--or to their parents--or to some other adult. What changes about the way they speak?

**What phrases do certain people in your life use often?** Are there particular things that they say which make you always know who is on the phone? Is there a certain phrase that they use that no one else does?

**Keep a notebook for dialogue where you can jot down phrases that you like.**

**Senses**

People generally associates themselves with one sense or another.

Some people are very **visual** in nature. They need to have their **house neat and their clothes just so.** If a visual person is trying to impress someone, they will clean and arrange a beautiful meal, and dress in beautiful clothes. They see the world in terms of sight. They say things like **show me, or let me see, or I can't really see that happening.** The things they notice most are visual.
Some people are more **auditory** in nature. They **have to hear everything**. These people like to talk things out. If they are interested in you, they will talk about it—tell you how they feel. **They say things like, listen to me, or I'm not hearing you.** These people experience their world more though sounds. They are comforted by the sound of rain on the roof or the shuffling of slippered feet in the hallway.

And then there are people out there who experience the world through **touch** more than any other sense. These are the kinetic, huggy people who always have to put a hand on your shoulder or pat you on the back while they make their point. If they care about someone, they will hug them and touch them to get across how they feel. **They say things like, I'm not feeling it or that gives me a feeling of contentment or anxiety.** They experience the world through touch and body feelings more than any of their other senses.

Now when we first fall in love, most people put out on all three levels. But as we grow in a relationship and get more comfortable, we revert back to our most predominant sense. So if you are really happy in a relationship to begin with and then find that your mate isn't telling you how he feels enough, you may find that he is more kinetic where you are more auditory. Once you realize this, you can make adjustments for each other, find a more compatible mate, or continue to feel dissatisfied.

But this isn't a relationship article. **What has this got to do with dialogue?** Well, if you are more visual then when you speak you'll talk about how things look or use terms like "can you see it" and "would you look at that". If you are more auditory, you'll say things like "just listen to me" and "you aren't really hearing what I have to say". If you are more kinetic, you'll talk about how things feel and say things like, "I'm not feeling it" or "my gut reaction is to..." So yes, the type of person your character is will determine how he views the world around him. This is a good thing to think about before your characters begin their adventure.

**Dialogue Tips**

- **Be sure the dialogue is consistent with each character**—each character will have a certain background, level of education, regional slang, occupational slang, ethnicity etc. Vary the dialogue among the characters. **Can you take the names away from the characters and still tell who is speaking?** If you don’t have this variety, give them something in their background to add it.
- **Keep it brief.** Minimize.
- **Make it natural.**
• **Use Contractions.**

• **Don't use names for the characters to address one another in dialogue** unless they are in a big crowd and it is necessary for clarity.

• **Go easy with dialect.** A couple of well placed words can give the reader a feeling of reading a dialect but you need to be selective. If you copied out the phrasing of someone's dialect, it will slow down your story. The reader takes longer to phonetically sound out each line and the meaning sometimes gets lost. It's like reading chat-speak. It may be slightly quicker for the typist to write 4U instead of for you, but it takes longer for the reader to read and decode it.

• **Use tag lines sparingly.** You don't need to tag every line of dialogue with a he said or she said. You should only tag dialogue if it is unclear who is speaking. You can usually use action and proper paragraphing to help make it clear who is speaking. We'll talk more about this in the dialogue punctuation section following.

• **Dialogue should assume a previous relationship between the characters if there is one.**

**Tag Lines—Creative Dialogue Tag Syndrome**

If there is one thing that needs repeating it’s this point. **Whenever you use a tag in dialogue it should be he said or she said. He asked or she asked is okay once in awhile, but no other dialogue tag should be used—ever.**

I discuss this in more detail in the punctuation section below, and I encourage you to read it thoroughly. This is one area that virtually every writer who has ever gone to school has to unlearn and they often find it frustrating.

Our teachers take dialogue tags as an opportunity for us to explore our creativity and learn new adverbs or adjectives. But it does a lot more harm than good for the writer who wants to become a professional writer someday.

Take a look at any published book and you’ll find that most dialogue tags are he said and she said. These are invisible to the reader and don’t take the reader’s attention away from the actual dialogue.

I will leave it at that at this point, but we will discuss it more in the punctuation section below.
Natural Dialogue

That last point bears repeating. **Dialogue should assume a previous relationship between the characters if there is one.**

That is the thing that most beginning writers struggle with. Don't try to make the dialogue tell the reader something. **The dialogue must be a natural communication between your characters.** And it won't come off as natural if you try to make it do something else.

So if you are writing a scene about a married couple—married couples talk in a certain way because they know each other’s history. They don’t need to explain a lot of stuff. **Announcing dialogue—where the characters are speaking for the sake of the audience, not to each other—is very bad.** We’d rather hear dialogue that we don’t understand that feels real, than dialogue we understand but feels artificial. We’ll catch up.

So if you have a scene where the husband is cooking and the wife comes home. He hears the door open.

“John, I’m home,” she says.

“Mary, I’m in here cooking.”

Mary comes in.

“So,” John says. “How was your interview today with Microsoft?”

**What’s wrong with this picture?** She walks in and says, “John, I’m home.” No married couple calls each other by name like this—in fact most people who know each other wouldn’t call each other by name. The only time you might need to use your character’s names in the dialogue would be when you are introducing yourself or calling on someone in a class or something. She’s just going to walk in and say, “I’m home,” if she says anything at all.

He doesn’t need to say he’s in there cooking, because she is going to find that out as soon as she walks in unless he wants to prepare her for the shock of him actually cooking. So he might say simply, “In here.”
He isn’t going to ask how the job interview at Microsoft is. A job interview at Microsoft would be a fairly substantial event in her day. He’s her husband and they both know what she was doing that day. He doesn’t need to say Microsoft. He is telling the audience. Here’s what he’s going to say, “Well?”

The audience will catch up. She could say something like, “Who knows? It seemed okay, but it’s Microsoft, who can tell?”

There are so many levels to writing dialogue. Some people are concerned about language and what is appropriate. This is an area more about instinct than any other. There is a sound to dialogue and you need to have an ear for it, much like a musician will have an ear for music. Can it be developed--to a certain extent, yes. **But being able to really listen and be honest about what you hear is the important thing.**

**If you are true to your character, he'll speak to you in his own way. You'll record it and if he swears, then he swears. Should you censor his speech? No, not if you want to tell the truth. And that really is your job as the writer--to portray they characters truthfully and just let them tell their story.**

**Dialogue Punctuation**

**Dialogue has its own set of peculiarities in terms of punctuation.** It seems to be the area that writer’s struggle with most.

**You have to be concerned with tag lines and quotes--whether there's a comma or a period. Does the comma go inside or outside the quotation marks? If the character doesn’t say anything do you still start a new paragraph? What do you do if the character talks for more than one paragraph?**

The questions can be endless. But once you know the rules, you’ll find it much easier to write those passages and make it clear who is speaking.
Tag Lines

Tag lines are the most peculiar thing about dialogue--the he said, she said. They follow their own punctuation rules. There are no clear cut usage rules for tag lines. It's all a matter of your ear--listening! Read out loud to train your ear so that you can hear where the tag line should go, or when it's not needed.

Make Them Invisible

The most important thing about tag lines is to make them as invisible as possible. You might think that anything sounds more interesting than he said or she said. Sighed, pouted, snarled, hissed, shrieked--all sound more intriguing. What could possibly be wrong with that?

But that is exactly the problem. They are too interesting. They take attention away from the actual words being spoken--and that is where you want your reader's attention focused.

The second problem with using all of these more creative tags is that, as the tags get more creative, the action actually becomes impossible. For example: you can't hiss the word run or jump--there's no s in them. You can't smile words or pout them. Smiling and pouting are separate actions, not part of the dialogue tag. So the first thing you want to do is to only use tag lines when absolutely necessary. And the second is to always (98% of the time) use he said or she said. You can use the occasional he asked or she replied--because they are very common as well. But keep other tags to a minimum.

Consider the following exaggerated exchange:

"Run," I screamed. "Get out of here, now."
"Not a chance," he spat. "I can't leave you here."
"Yes, you can," I groaned. "Go now, or we'll both be caught."
A hand clapped down on his shoulder before I could even warn him.
"Yes," Bernard hissed. "I thought I saw someone prowling around my yard..."

Okay, this may not be much of an exchange, but do you see how the tags actually detract from the dialogue. Here is the dialogue written with less tags and no creative ones.

"Run--get out of here, now." I pushed him away.
"Not a chance," he said. "I can't leave you here."
"Yes, you can." I groaned pushing harder now, desperate to get him away from here. "Go now, or we'll both be caught."

A hand clapped down on his shoulder before I could even warn him. "Yes," Bernard said, squeezing his shoulder for emphasis, "I thought I saw someone prowling around my yard..."

It isn’t a brilliant piece of dialogue, but do you see how this one sounds more natural? The bits of action helped, but there was nothing to distract you from the conversation.

**Punctuation**

Now for the fun part, putting the quotes and tags together.

Simple statements can be punctuated several ways depending on where in the sentence the tag line appears. It can be done three ways--tag line at the front, middle or end.

- *I asked,* "Hey, are you going to the dance tonight?"
- "Hey," I asked, "are you going to the dance tonight?"
- "Hey, are you going to the dance tonight?" I asked.

If the statement ends in a period, rather than a question mark or exclamation mark, you would use a comma before the tag line if it is one of the latter two examples above.

- *I said,* "Yeah, sure, I bought tickets last week."
- "Yeah, sure," I said, "I bought tickets last week."
- "Yeah, sure, I bought tickets last week," I said.

The tag line changes the punctuation around it. It turns periods into commas and conjures commas out of thin air. But it changes punctuation in other ways too.

If I take the earlier example and replace I with he, this is what happens.
He asked, "Hey, are you going to the dance tonight?"
"Hey," he asked, "are you going to the dance tonight?"
"Hey, are you going to the dance tonight?" he asked.

Notice how, even though the sentence has clearly ended, we use lowercase letters with the tag line follows the dialogue.

If it were two sentences, with the tag line in between it would be like the following.

"Are we ready to go?" she asked. "Did you want to drive first?"

The tag line isn't capitalized, unless it starts the sentence.

Sometimes a character decides to speak for several paragraphs--say he's telling a story or something. It is best to avoid having your characters speech on and on. If they must speak for more than a paragraph, you can often break it up with the use of action or by grounding the reader in the setting. But there are times when it isn't avoidable and your character must speech. So what do you do with the punctuation?

The following is from the opening of Eoin Colfer's, Artemis Fowl. I chose this excerpt because it was several paragraphs and it is written with such a voice as to really sound like someone speaking--like a narrator. So I thought it would work well for our discussion. Pretend this is a character in a book speaking these lines as dialogue. This is how it would be punctuated.

"How does one describe Artemis Fowl?" he asked. "Various psychiatrists have tried and failed. The main problem is Artemis's own intelligence. He bamboozles every test thrown at him. He has puzzled the greatest medical minds, and sent many of them gibbering to their own hospitals.

"There is no doubt that Artemis is a child prodigy. But why does someone of such brilliance dedicate himself to criminal activities? This is a question that can be answered by only one person. And he delights in not talking.

"Perhaps the best way to create an accurate picture of Artemis is to tell the by now famous account of his first villainous venture. I have put together this report from firsthand interviews with the victims, and as the tale unfolds, you will realize that this was not easy.
"The story began several years ago at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Artemis Fowl had devised a plan to restore his family's fortune. A plan that could topple civilizations and plunge the planet into a cross-species war.

"He was twelve years old at the time..."

You start the passage with quotes and you don't close the quotes until the passage is finished. But at the beginning of each paragraph, you use the open quotes to remind the reader that this is a character speaking.

**Paragraphing Dialogue**

The most subtle part of dialogue punctuation is paragraphing. It's the simple stroke of the enter key, but it can make the difference of knowing who is speaking and being confused.

Here is an example of paragraphing in a story. Each character gets his own paragraph. The character's actions stay with their words in the same paragraph. Whenever the speaker changes, the paragraph changes. The character even gets his own paragraph if he just nods and doesn't say anything at all. The following is an excerpt from my story *Last Train to Midnight*. It is a conversation between a grandfather and his two grandchildren when they come back to the hospital unexpectedly.

"Hold on there! What are you two doing back?"

"Mom," Jake said.

"She’s stable now. It was another of those seizures. Lucky I was here."

"She spoke?" Sophie asked.

*Grandpa’s face clouded over. “Spoke? No, honey, your mom hasn’t spoken for quite some time. It was one of those seizures where her breathing gets irregular and her eyes roll up in her head and she shakes a lot. You’ve seen it happen before.”*

"But, the phone—" Sophie said.
“Phone? Honey, there’s no phone in your mom’s room. Remember? We had them take it out.”

Sophie threw Jake a desperate glance.

“Now, suppose you two tell me how you knew there was trouble. I thought you’d be home by now.”

Jake kept his eyes trained on the floor. He shrugged. “I had a sudden feeling something was wrong,” he said, then looked up. “We came back to see. That’s all.”

Sophie opened her mouth to say something, but Jake’s piercing glare shut her up.

Grandpa watched the exchange with a look of concern. “That’s all?”

“That’s all,” Jake repeated.

“All right. Go on out and sit in the truck. The doctor will be finished any minute and I’ll be out shortly.”

Notice the blue lines? The interaction between Jake and Sophie gets its own paragraph, even though no one is speaking. You can also see here that I very seldom use tags, though this is a children’s book so I probably use them more than I usually would.

And that’s all there is to it. Easy right? 😊 It can take some time to get comfortable with all of these rules, but once you do, it makes the dialogue easier to read.

**Exercises**

Do as many or few of these questions as you like. Pay particular attention to the dialogue story in the first exercise though. It’s an amazing exercise!

1. **Dialogue Story**—Write a scene or a short story using only dialogue. Write the story or scene between two people—your viewpoint character and one other person. The conversation can be written with quotes for your viewpoint character’s dialogue and no quotes for the other person. Be sure to change paragraphs every time you change speakers. Try to keep the dialogue natural but reveal the setting and situation through the character’s words as much as

2. **Write down the things you say over the course of the day.** Examine your own speech patterns. You don’t have to get every word, but you may find that you say less than you think and that your statements are surprisingly short. You might also find that you rarely speak in complete sentences.

3. **Find a crowded place such as a restaurant, a bar, or a shopping mall and write down snippets of the conversations you hear.** Avoid trying to record whole conversations, just follow along for a brief exchange and then listen for your next target. If you are worried about looking suspicious, you might want to purchase a Palm Pilot, Handspring Visor or other hand-held PDA device. These handy spy tools make it look like you are conducting business or playing with your favorite electronic toy rather than eavesdropping.

4. **Test responses to the same question.** *Think of a question that will require at least a little thought, and ask it of several different people.* Compare their responses. Remember that you are focused on their words. Write them down as soon as you can.

5. **Write the dialogue for a scene without using any modifiers.** Just write down a conversation as it goes along naturally. After you have completed the dialogue, add narrative description, but not dialogue tags such as said, shouted or ordered. Instead, try to work the dialogue into the action as a logical progression of the statements. Finally, add any dialogue tags that are absolutely necessary, and keep them simple such as said or asked. Again, only put them in if you can find no other options. Compare this to the previous dialogue you have written and see what you like or dislike about the changes.

6. **Write down the things you say over the course of the day.** *Examine your own speech patterns.* You don’t have to get every word, but you may find that you say less than you think and that your statements are surprisingly short. You might also find that you rarely speak in complete sentences.
7. Write a scene in which one person tells another person a story. Make sure that you write it as a dialogue and not just a first person narrative, but clearly have one person telling the story and the other person listening and asking questions or making comments. The purpose of this scene will be both to have the story stand alone as a subject, and to have the characters' reactions to the story be the focal point of the scene.

8. Write a scene in which one person is listening to two other people have an argument or discussion. For example, a child listening to her parents argue about money. Have the third character narrate the argument and explain what is going on, but have the other two provide the entire dialogue. It is not necessary to have the narrator understand the argument completely. Miscommunication is a major aspect of dialogue.

9. Write a conversation between two liars. Give everything they say a double or triple meaning. Never state or indicate through outside description that these two people are lying. Let the reader figure it out strictly from the dialogue. Try not to be obvious, such as having one person accuse the other of lying. That is too easy.

10. Write a conversation in which no character speaks more than three words per line of dialogue. Again, avoid crutches such as explaining everything they say through narration. Use your narration to enhance the scene, not explain the dialogue.

11. Write a narrative or scripted scene in which several characters are taking an active role in the conversation. This can be a difficult aspect of dialogue to master, because with each additional character, the reader or audience must be able to keep track of the motivations and interests of the individuals involved. This can be especially difficult in prose, where the time between one character speaking and the next can be interrupted by action or description. See how many characters you can sustain within the scene and still have it make sense and be engaging.

12. Recently a writer I know was eavesdropping near a public phone at a grocery store. (All writers need to eavesdrop shamelessly.) She heard, 'Hey, it's me. I'm not pregnant. [pause] OK. Whole milk or skimmed? See you in a bit.' Click. She's been trying to plot a story around this exchange ever since. Write a story or scene using dialogue only. Since every scene in every story should contain conflict, you'll want to keep this key concept in mind as you work with your stories.
13. **Write a short scene in which the protagonist (hero or heroine) meets the antagonist (love object, enemy, baddie, victim) for the first time.** Using mostly dialogue, try to build a sense of context (the world of the story) and what the couple might want from each other.

### Setting

You can find a setting worksheet on my website that allows you to keep track of all your locations. It also lets you collate any research you’ve done concerning the significant places mentioned in your novel. You can download the worksheets at [http://www.the-writers-craft.com/creative-writing-worksheets.html](http://www.the-writers-craft.com/creative-writing-worksheets.html). Feel free to print them out and use them in your classes.

### Sensory Detail

At the end of the setting worksheets you’ll find a sensory chart which will encourage you to explore the sensory details of your settings. **This is perhaps the most important part of your setting worksheet.** While you may wish to complete the entire worksheet for your most prevalent settings, you may choose to only complete the sensory chart for the rest. A word can trigger a memory of a smell or a taste that effectively brings the reader right into the story. Don’t overlook these evocative tools which can totally involve the reader in the story, enabling him to leave his living room to brave the steamy Amazon jungle or to cross the blistering sands of the Sierra or to risk the icy slopes of snow-capped mountains.

What do you think is the key difference between a book and a movie?

**Sensory Detail.**

When we read we should be able to engage all of our senses, to merge with the protagonist for awhile. We are tramping through that jungle, feeling the moist heat like a steam bath, through our skin, hearing the insects chirping and buzzing, smelling the rich earth and the exotic perfumes of the plants.
We often use our sense of sight to the exclusion of our other senses, but it is the other senses that trigger the strongest memories and images. Imagine for a moment the smell of your mother’s kitchen on Christmas day (or holiday of your choice). Doesn’t that bring back memories and emotions?

Of course you don’t need to detail every single scene, but you should pay special attention to your major settings and this will make the rest of your writing more sensual as well.

**Mapping the Sensory Detail**

Here is another good exercise to help you edit your descriptions for sensory input after you’ve written the story. Select a different colored highlighter or pencil for each of the five senses—say yellow for sight, blue for smell, red for sound, purple for touch, and green for taste. Highlight or underline the descriptive passages in your manuscript according to which senses are used in the description. Try to make your work look like a rainbow rather than all one color—usually yellow in this instance.

**Grounding the Reader**

We don’t need to see long passages of description showing off your brilliant prose. We need to know only what we absolutely need to know to ground the reader in the setting—so pick the most brilliant passages and sprinkle them throughout the story.

When you use description, **make it do more work than just describe the scene.** Make sure your character interacts with your setting, rather than just observe it. (Back to the elemental “Show, don’t Tell.”) If he must just observe something, have some character revealing interpretation going on. One of my favorite examples of this comes once again from one of my favorite authors: Scott Westerfeld—he breaks all of the rules so well, including the one, never start a book with the weather. Here are the first couple of paragraphs of *Uglies*. His description may not be pretty but we really get a sense of his character.

*The early summer sky was the color of cat vomit.*

Of course, Tally thought, you’d have to feed your cat only salmon-flavored cat food for a while, to get the pinks just right. The scudding clouds did look a bit fishy, rippled into scales by a high-altitude wind. As the light faded, deep blue gaps of night peered through like an upside-down ocean, bottomless and cold.
Any other summer, a sunset like this would have been beautiful. But nothing had been beautiful since Peris turned pretty. Losing your best friend sucks, even if it’s only for three months and two days.

Do you see how much work this descriptive passage does? Right away we know that Tally is unhappy, though he doesn’t come out and say this. We are immediately inside Tally’s head and we can sympathize with her. The author also raised some questions about how someone turns pretty and why they have to go away when they do, creating the urge to read on to find out.

The other place that it becomes important to add bits of setting to ground the reader is within long passages of dialogue. We’ll talk more about this later in the course when we study dialogue. For now it is important to keep in mind that you can insert small details to break up the dialogue and to make the reader more aware of what is going on with the character. Just a line here or there such as having the character clasp their hands in front of them on the desk or fiddle with their coffee cup can indicate that they are nervous or to remind us that the conversation is taking place in someone’s office. Always try to use actions to reveal something about character or plot when giving tidbits of setting.

**Setting Exercises**

1. Use the sensory input form I provided with your lesson. Sit in a quiet place, close your eyes and imagine a particular setting for your scene. Think about all of your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, or touch? Make notes in the appropriate boxes.

2. After you’ve written a scene, get some colored pencils and highlighters and attach one color to each of the five senses—yellow for sight, red for sound, green for touch, orange for smell, and blue for taste, for example. Now go through your scene and underline or highlight any descriptive passages according to which sense they appeal to. Try to make your pages look like a rainbow, rather than mostly yellow.

3. Sharpen your visual memory. Arrange a still-life for your class. Allow the kids to view it for 15 seconds, then have them write down as many things as they can remember. How many did they get? Who was able to remember the most things? This is an important skill to develop. Look for details wherever you are and get used to describing them (writing them) in your head.
4. Imagine someone has never encountered a ripe peach. Describe it so that the person can experience it through all of their senses. Now try describing it using all the senses except for sight.

5. Try clustering with sensory input—bitter, pungent, sweet, sour, clang, swish, crash, etc. Are there any ideas or details that you might use?

6. Another exercise for capturing the essence of a setting quickly—say you are traveling or just out for a walk and you see a perfect setting for your book. Open your handy notebook and draw a line down the middle of your page and then across to create quadrants. You should have four boxes roughly the same size. Label each one sight, sound, smell and sensation. Those are likely to be the senses that you will notice in a setting. The last box is for what you find most memorable, or the things which resonate with you, or feelings that they invoke in you. Fill in the boxes with one or two words only -- just triggers, not sentences and as many as you have time for starting with the most immediate/important reaction to the scene. When you are doing your piece—days, weeks or even later, you can quite easily recreate the images, and all the sensations you felt--it puts you in the picture so to speak.

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**Story Structure**

Story structure for a novel is very different than that of a short story. Generally in a classroom setting and with young writers we’re mostly dealing with short stories. I’ll keep my structure advice aimed in that direction.

A short story is a very concise form. You have a short amount of space to connect with your reader and portray a conflict and resolution. Something I’ve noticed when teaching writing is that adult students generally focus on beginning and ending and children focus more on the middle or the action of the story. A story has to contain all three. It needs a beginning, a middle and an ending.
Beginning

There are two important jobs to accomplish in the opening of your story. The first is to establish the conflict. Conflict is key. If everything is great in your character’s life, then there is no story.

So there has to be some conflict in the story—an outer conflict is preferable, especially when you are a beginning writer, but there can be both external and internal conflict. Sometimes a story is more introspective and will only have internal conflict. That’s okay too. But the more conflict the better.

It is best to choose a conflict that can resonate with your target audience. Picture yourself telling the story to someone in your audience. Pick your younger cousin or a friend or an older sibling. Just choose someone the right age and with the right interests to enjoy your story. Now, choose a conflict that will keep him riveted as you tell the story. The reader should be asking, how can he possibly get out of that mess.

Also, it’s good to think a little bit about what you want your story to say. Not that you want to be overly preachy when you write. But the reader should take something away from a good story. That definitely adds value.

There should also be a goal for your story. We need a measurable end point in mind so that we can determine if the hero wins or loses.

The other important thing to establish in the opening of your story is a connection between the reader and the character. The reader needs to have a reason to take that leap of faith and transfer himself into the story. There are several ways in which you can accomplish this. These are from Michael Hauge’s Six Stage Plot Structure.

- sympathy—you can make your character sympathetic to the reader by making him the victim of some undeserved misfortune.
- jeopardy—put your character in danger. This can be a physical danger or a danger of losing something important to them.
- likeable—make the character a basically good guy and/or make him well-liked by other characters.
- funny—we all like to be around people who are funny. So if this is something that you are able to do, it increases the reader’s ability to connect.
• **powerful**—make the character good at what he does. Maybe he’s a superhero or maybe he’s just really good at something. We all want to be great at something so we relate easily to someone who embodies this.

**Middle**

The middle of the story is **the action part. It’s the meat of the story.** This is where you **create obstacles that your hero must overcome in order to achieve the goal.**

In a short story, you need to keep your word count down and so you can’t go into the detail that you have room for in a novel. In its simplest form, the short story middle happens in threes. Two obstacles don’t feel like enough. It’s just too easy. And more than three begins to feel redundant. The younger the audience for your story, the truer this is.

**There will be three obstacles that the hero must surpass in order to achieve the goal.** These obstacles might be laid out from the beginning or they might appear as the previous obstacle is conquered.

This is the fun part. You’ve done the work of setting up the story and now you get to play. **Don’t make it easy for your character. A short story is about a life changing moment.** So heap those obstacles up. Make sure he has to work to achieve the goal.

**Ending**

**The ending of the story should reflect the beginning** in some way. You’ve set a goal in the beginning and your character has either achieved it or failed at this point. But what the reader takes away from the story is how this journey has changed the character.

Short stories are about **life changing moments.** They aren’t as long as a novel, but they are more poignant. They can give you that feeling like you’ve been punched in the gut. This is where you get to impart that take away value we spoke of in the beginning. **What is it that your story says about people or the world?** Don’t tell us. Show us.
Story Essence

All stories have the same essence. Here is a story summary written by Gary Provost.

Once upon a time, something happened to someone, and he decided that he would pursue a goal. So he devised a plan of action, and even though there were forces trying to stop him, he moved forward because there was a lot at stake. And just as things seemed as bad as they could get, he learned an important lesson, and when offered the prize he had sought so strenuously, he had to decide whether or not to take it, and in making that decision he satisfied a need that had been created by something in his past.

Simply define the italicized elements and you have a dramatically satisfying story.

A Series of Scenes

Seeing your story in a series of scenes is the first step in creating a dynamic story that the reader can fully experience. Think of the story as a movie, playing in your head. You will need some exposition to link scenes together, but you should keep this to a minimum.

A scene occurs at a specific time and place. When there is a leap in time or setting, there is a scene change. If you find yourself summarizing or generalizing about what your characters say or do, then you are writing exposition and not a scene. She had a great time at the party—is a type of summary. It should either be developed into a scene, letting the audience experience the great time she is having at the party along with her, or it should be dropped altogether. Of course there will need to be bridges of transition built into your story, but the scene is the main building block.

Show, Don’t Tell

It has become almost cliché by its frequency of use. It is the first ground rule laid down by most writing instructors. But what does it really mean?

“Don’t say the old lady screamed; bring her on and let her scream.”

—Mark Twain
It’s all about empathy. It is about the ability of the reader to live vicariously through the characters in the story. If you start interpreting your character’s feelings for the reader, you put a barrier between your reader and your character and the reader will stiffen and look for a reason to disagree. It’s human nature. If you tell me that something is good, or beautiful, or frightening, well I might agree if I know you and trust your judgment. But if I don’t know you and you tell me that, it doesn’t really make me believe it. And I certainly don’t feel that emotion myself. As a reader, I don’t want you to tell me how to feel, I want you to show me what the character is going through and let me feel that for myself.

For example: If I tell you:

Jake was afraid and nervous about what he would find on the train platform that night.

Does that make you feel any fear or nervousness? Not likely.

But if I say:

The platform was deserted as Jake stood alone in the moonlight. He felt guilty for giving Sophie the slip, setting the time back two hours on her alarm clock. But he knew he’d feel worse if he put his kid sister in danger and he was certain that if this midnight train was for real, there would be danger.

His nerves were strung tight as he listened hard—for what? There wasn’t even a whisper of a breeze as the silence pressed down around him. The night was as still as death, as though the bright moonbeams had frozen every chirping cricket, every humming insect. Even the usual damp, earthy smell of the night air was absent. Jake knelt beside the tracks and felt the rails. There was no vibration, no rumble.

Disappointment fought relief as he stepped back up onto the platform—there wasn’t going to be any train. It had all been a trick—someone’s sick idea of a joke. Still, the memory of his mother’s voice calling his name made his spine tingle. He read the ticket again, as if the words might have changed. February 29th. Midnight.

He looked at his watch. 11:59 p.m. The Midnight Express would be late if it came at all. He breathed easier. A late train, for some reason, didn’t frighten him as much. It meant that the train must be subject to circumstance and human failings. He could deal with that. He looked up at the moon, and the first beetle hit him.
The vicarious experience comes from experiencing the action through the characters' senses and thoughts. This is why you need to include lots of sensory details in your story. The reader wants to feel what the character is feeling not be told about it.

Search for emotional qualifiers in your work: angry, fearless, tender, overjoyed, anguished, devastated, etc. Ask yourself if you can replace this with a series of actions to show the reader how the character is feeling rather than telling him.

Imagine your scenes through, playing them like a movie in your head. Put yourself in the situation and live it through your characters. If you are laughing or crying while you write the scene, chances are your reader will be too.

You only have 2,000 words or less in a short story to get the whole story out. So you have to be choosy with your scenes. Pick a series of 3 to 7 scenes that will allow you to tell the story. Then all you have to do is link them together.

**Ideas**

Ideas are everywhere. You can find them by observing the people around you in their daily activities. Imagine them in another situation. How would they react? Your imagination grows as you feed it.

1. **Newspapers**—scan the paper for stories that might spark an idea. You don’t want to tell the story as it is, obviously, but begin with a situation and play what if.
2. **Read stories and poetry** and use your reaction to these as sparks for ideas.
3. **Overheard conversations**. A snippet of someone’s conversation in a store or a hallway can spark a story idea.
4. **Objects**—things can spark ideas. Take two or three things and mix them together and see what you come up with.
5. **Pictures**—They say a picture is worth a thousand words and that’s about right for a short story—or at least half of a short story. The following are some pictures I’ve found that might spark some ideas from young writers. Feel free to use your own, from coloring books or magazines or illustrate your own.
Exercises

1. Have the students list different people on small scraps of paper (eg. a nun, a doctor, a boy who is 12, a young Hispanic girl, a computer programmer, etc). Then have them repeat the exercise with a thing (eg. a book, a tree, a sandbox, a monkey, etc.). Then have them do it once more with an activity (eg. skateboarding, swimming, playing piano, hiking, knife-fighting, canoeing, etc.). Put the scraps of paper for each category in a hat or box and shake them up. Draw out one from each category and try to write a story that includes all three elements. This can be done with specific phrases or words as well.

The following are a list of prompts that can spark a story. Some of them are repeats from the Voice section in the beginning, but these ones would work for a short story rather than just a scene.

1. Write a story about irony, with a teacher as the main character and a fuse box as the key object. Set your story in a lab.

2. Use these words in a story: hurricane, lawnmower, flashlight, sandwich.

3. Start your story with: “She touched the little box in her pocket and smiled.”

4. Weave a story around a 60 year old photograph.

5. Little brother gets hold of valuable CD.

6. Use the following metaphors in a story: a course of sorrow, a spoonful of delight, a knot of hate.

7. Write a story about friendship with a high school student as the main character and a fountain as the key object? Set your story inside a flower shop.

8. Start your story with, “I could just make out the windows high in the castle wall.”

9. Shadows quivered on the wall as the candle flickered, then fizzled to nothing...

10. The prickles on his neck told him he was being watched.
11. She tore through the alley, ducked into a doorway, and tried to squeeze into nothingness...

12. The dream last night had seemed so real, but it was just a dream, right?

13. The chattering birds made her smile, until she heard a growl...

14. Colors swooped and swirled behind his closed eyelids as the music soared, taking him back to...

15. Ginger Kemp and Pete Papillon meet in a hospital ward. One of them wants to be someone else. Write their story.

16. “Alice tried to remember who had given her the key…”

Conclusion

I hope you have enjoyed the workbook and have found some useful exercises to teach your students or your children to write more effectively. Please contact me if you have any questions. sherrywilson@ripnet.com

Write on!

Sherry

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