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INCLUDES  
EXPERT ADVICE  
ON HOW TO GET  
PUBLISHED!

# EVERYTHING CREATIVE WRITING BOOK

2nd  
Edition

ALL YOU NEED TO CRAFT WELL-WRITTEN  
AND MARKETABLE STORIES, SCREENPLAYS,  
BLOGS, AND MORE

WENDY BURT-THOMAS



# THE EVERYTHING

## CREATIVE WRITING BOOK, Second Edition

Dear Reader,

When I was in grade school, I wrote plays that my classmates and I would perform for the younger kids. I was thrilled to have people entertained by my writing, even if they were kindergarteners. I also wrote silly poems about my friends and would read them aloud in class. Afterward, I'd have a gaggle of fourth-graders seeking commissioned work. "Write about me next time!" they'd beg. I was hooked.

But the moment that pointed me toward the path to becoming a writer came from a poem that I wrote at age sixteen. My father (also a writer) had submitted it to a magazine and I had no idea—until I received an acceptance letter and a check. In that moment, I knew people cared what I had to say; that the words I chose, organized, and typed onto a piece of paper were of value (ten dollars, to be exact).

I hope this book reminds you that your words have value—whether published or not. Perhaps you'll reconnect with your childhood love for writing, or maybe begin a new courtship. Either way, enjoy the journey. And if you happen to entertain people along the way, even better.

Sincerely,

*Wendy Burt-Thomas*

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THE  
**EVERYTHING**

CREATIVE WRITING BOOK, SECOND  
EDITION

All you need to craft well-written and marketable stories,  
screenplays, blogs, and more

Wendy Burt-Thomas

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## **Dedication**

*This book is dedicated to new writers who are eager to learn, and the experienced writers who believe there are plenty of opportunities to go around.*



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## **Top Ten Ways for New Writers to Get Published**

1. Enter legitimate writing contests.
2. Submit your short stories, personal essays, and poetry to anthologies.
3. Send a letter to the editor at your local newspaper.
4. Query a consumer magazine for an article idea.
5. Submit your short stories and poetry to small literary magazines.
6. Pitch a great book idea to an agent.
7. Write a book, movie, or music review for your local arts newspaper.
8. Ask to write for your church or company newsletter.
9. Start a blog and post regularly.
10. Offer to write copy for a friend or family member's business website.

## Introduction

You love reading. You've done a little bit of writing. And you've often wondered if you could be a writer like the incredibly creative authors you admire, but you're not quite sure where to start.

Well, *The Everything® Creative Writing Book* can help. It will guide you through the entire process, from preparing yourself to write—in your workspace and in your mind—to getting fresh ideas to drafting your copy and editing it. Plus you'll learn all about the different formats of writing and find hundreds of writing tips, resources, examples, inspirational excerpts, advice, and encouragement via interviews with successful authors, how-to pointers, challenges, and even rescue techniques to help you out of those dreaded strikes of writer's block. If you have the interest and the desire to become a more creative writer—and it's looking like you do—and if you are willing to take the time to learn and practice, this book can show you how to improve your writing skills and express yourself imaginatively in a variety of ways.

With dedication, skill building, and time, it's entirely possible that you could become another Nora Roberts, E. B. White, Toni Morrison, Dean Koontz, Sue Grafton, or Nicholas Sparks. You could develop a style so expressive, so true, and so yours, that whenever someone reads something that you wrote, he or she might wish, like Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, that “when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.”

You could succeed as a creative writer beyond your wildest, bestselling-author, cross-country-book-signing dreams. But you could also fail. You could put in the time, tell everyone you know that you're working to become a writer, write and write and write, and still not get published. The thought is daunting, to say the least. But there's still another possible drawback. While you're courageously giving this writing thing your all, you could run into resistance instead of reinforcement. Friends, colleagues, parents, children, even your partner or your spouse might try to discourage you by telling you what you already know: that you could fail, that you could get your feelings hurt, that you might not have what it takes. Such disheartening counsel, whether spoken to spare you pain or from jealousy disguised as caring, can give an author a terminal case of writer's block.

So why try to do it? Why not just carry on quietly and safely behind the

perfectly useful and perfectly ordinary words that many people set down on paper when they must write something—in their business documents, their personal correspondence, perhaps in an occasional journal entry or school paper or speech?

Because you love words. Because you feel you have something to say and you'd like to say it in the best possible, most interesting way. Because you love to communicate and connect with all kinds of people. Because you find joy in the colors, tastes, rhythms, and smells of language. Because you have opinions, experiences, and feelings that you need to share with your readers. Because you want to explore and question and make sense of what you see around you, and help others to do the same. Because you see things in a special way.

By giving your love of language a chance to blossom and grow, and by setting a goal of becoming an accomplished creative writer, you might one day find yourself in a Manhattan bookstore, signing your name on hundreds of copies of your latest biography. Or perhaps you'll be watching a sold-out performance of a play that you penned. Or maybe the story you got published in a major magazine will earn you a hefty check.

All those things could happen. But what will definitely happen when you make the commitment to write more creatively is that you'll learn new skills, gain new knowledge, and find new ways to express yourself—even if you “fail” and not a word that you write is ever published. Learning and growing will expand your horizons and increase your abilities, give you an amazing feeling of well-being and fulfillment, and enable you to put your special stamp on a bit of the world.

# **Chapter 1. Preparing to Write**

What do you need in order to write well? There are, of course, tangible things such as a computer or a pen and paper. But you also need time, inspiration, a positive attitude, and the expectation of success to keep writing at your best.

## **Find a Comfortable Place to Write**

In many authors' experience, surroundings and equipment that suit their personalities and styles make it more likely that the blank page before them will eventually be covered with compelling copy. In fact, the ideal writing place may automatically, just by your being there, set your writing muscles in motion.

What would work for you if you had the luxury of setting up a custom workplace? Think about how you like to read or study, how sound affects you, how easily you're distracted, how disciplined you are, if you need people around you, and your general nature. Can you work with the radio on or with other people around, or do you need complete silence? Is a designated workspace necessary or can you write at your dining room table? Will a tabletop waterfall help create a harmonious environment, or will it only serve to drive you crazy?

The trick is finding a writing space that's tailored to your style, needs and comfort. Just because other people can crank out pages on their laptop at the local coffee shop doesn't mean it's right for you.

You need a place where you can write comfortably and where your materials will be safe from prying eyes, jelly-dripping fingers (except your own, of course), and constant interruption.

## **Consider the View**

Some authors find a workspace with a great view very distracting because anything that catches their eye can break their concentration or interrupt their thoughts. Looking at a white, windowless wall that is devoid of ornamentation is the only way for some to see the words instead of the world.

But for others, pleasant surroundings inspire and encourage the creative process. You may find that a window into your garden or the sight of the sun rising over your city's landscape gives you the calm and the visual nourishment

you need to write at your best. If no outdoor scenery is possible, fresh or silk flowers on your bookshelf or photos of your latest travels or family get-together might be the inspirational ticket to that perfect word or to nailing down your crime novel's plot. Even if your work area is just an alcove off the kitchen or a corner of the basement that you use when everyone else is asleep, pinning up a soothing, motivational, or challenging poster or drawing may be just what you need to keep those writing juices flowing.

*These days, I live most of the time in uninterrupted solitude in a cottage above a wide bay in the west of Ireland—just me and the dog and the southwest wind coming off the sea. . . . [But] eight hours a day of pampered peace do not make art. Or—they never would for me. I write to be read. The impulse comes out of the turbulence of real life. . . . So when the lonely quiet of the west of Ireland begins to slow me down, I head for the streets of New York, where the brawls and traffic and cries and joys begin the minute I arrive at the taxi stand at J.F.K. And once I'm standing at a counter on Sixth Avenue knocking back a hot dog and a papaya juice, shopping bags at my feet—that's when I know I am a part of Creation, and where I muster my own measure of creativity to throw into the mix.*

*—Nuala O'Faolain, author of Are You Somebody?  
( New York Times Magazine , April 1, 2001)*

## **Your Personal Space**

What if you share your space with others? For example, you and your spouse both use the same desk—you for writing and your partner for paying bills and organizing personal records. Or maybe others have easy access to it—perhaps your workspace is in the corner of the family room, where your children often play or you sometimes entertain friends with popcorn and videos. In any case, you'll want to make certain that you have a lockable drawer or file cabinet where you can store your materials safely. There's nothing worse than discovering the pages that took you so much time and sweat-producing effort to write were “moved out of the way” to make room for a board game, or that the research notes that ate up days of phoning and legwork are nowhere in sight when you need them. Even if you have to put everything away and set it all up again each time you write, it's worth the effort to ensure you won't be spending your precious writing time redoing what you've already done.

Custom-fit your workspace with an eye and an ear to what will work for you, and then keep adjusting it until your writing room is the way you need it to be to produce your best work possible. You'll discover whether or not you've established the ultimate writing environment by spending a lot of time in it—writing.





If you think you'll be doing a lot of research and/or interviews, consider putting your writing place reasonably close to a telephone. The Internet is a research tool of choice among many writers, so a computer is vital—if you can restrain yourself from the lure of online games and incoming e-mails.

## **Tools of the Trade**

According to novelist Fay Weldon, “all a writer needs is a pencil and a piece of paper and a corner and nobody noticing and the desire to do it; that’s all it takes.” But there are a few other tools writers might need or could use to help them along in their writing endeavors.

## **Reference Materials**

Depending on the type of writing you will be doing, you will need various kinds of reference books: dictionaries (general, topic-specific, and foreign language), a thesaurus, an encyclopedia, an atlas, fact and trivia books, an almanac, grammar guides, quotation books, and style guides (see Appendix B for suggestions). Also include books that you might keep around to use as inspirational examples of the type of writing you are aiming to produce.

To build a personal library inexpensively, try these ideas:

- Start a book group and hold frequent book exchanges; look for genres that fill in the gaps on your shelves
- Organize a regular neighborhood book exchange
- Frequent garage and yard sales
- Buy used reference materials from online sources such as Half.com and Amazon.com
- Browse through the remaindered and greatly marked-down book sections at bookstores
- Search the library sale shelves
- Don't miss the periodical big library sales
- Visit nearby thrift stores
- Ask for books or bookstore gift certificates for your birthday and other

gift-giving occasions

## Writing Medium

In this day and age, you essentially have two writing options available: a computer (don't forget to back up all your files), or paper and pen (pens and pencils of different colors can be useful). Yes, some folks still prefer the clickity-clack of an old-fashioned typewriter, but they're few and far between. (Getting ink ribbons for typewriters can also be a challenge.) Pick what works best for you, but remember that if you are planning to publish your work, your writing will eventually have to be converted to computer files.



"At age twenty-five I bought my first Mont Blanc Diplomat fountain pen . . . that pen, to me, was the symbol and the tool of a real writer. . . . I also learned that the pen is mightier than the sword but the sword is easier to clean."

—Rita Mae Brown, author of *Rubyfruit Jungle*

Invest in a filing cabinet to store your work, notes, Post-it notes you've jotted ideas on, index cards, and other office materials. Some writers find a tape recorder useful for taking notes.

It is also important to find a sturdy, comfortable chair and position yourself near a good light source.

## Luxury Writing Tools

For those of you who can afford them, the following items can certainly make your work more efficient.

- Laptop computer and carrying case
- Fax machine
- Scanner
- Internet access
- Laser printer
- Copier
- Headset for the telephone
- Ergonomic chair
- Top-quality pen

You also might want to invest in a Space Pen because it lets you write anywhere. You can use the wall as a table, write in extreme heat or cold, and

more. Check out [www.spacepen.com](http://www.spacepen.com) .

## **Don't Leave Home Without It**

Make it a habit to travel with your notepad or tape recorder. Once you start writing, you'll find that ideas, phrases, questions, and "eurekas!" mysteriously pop into your mind at all times of the day and night. You'll want to capture them when they do—before they disappear forever. Next time you're at the drugstore or an office-supply store, pick up a few small notepads. Then, station one along with a pen or pencil everywhere you can think of—on your bedside table with a tiny flashlight (for 2 a.m. jottings), in your purse or pocket, in your car, in the kitchen, in your gardening-tools tote, tucked into a niche on the porch, in the bathroom, and on a closet shelf to toss into your coat pocket as you're heading out the door.

Or, instead of stashing notepads the way squirrels stash acorns, you can do what a number of successful creative writers do: always keep a folded index card in your pocket so that you're ready when that perfect word you've been desperate to think of suddenly leaps to mind while you're walking the dog, running errands, or taking the subway into work. Your friends and family may think you're a bit crazy, but great ideas and great writing solutions can appear just like that, and disappear just as quickly. As in scouting, the key is to "be prepared;" you never know when creative lightning will strike.

## **Get into the Spirit of Creative Writing**

Once you've got your writing space and writing tools set up, there are no more excuses. It's time to start writing. So how do you turn an idea that's been forever rolling around in your mind into a short story, or set down a memory from your childhood that you'd like your children to learn about? How do you put more life into your business materials, or take up the challenge of a completely new format like poetry or a screenplay? How do you get your writing to be more creative?



"If you want to write, you can. Fear stops most people from writing, not lack of talent, whatever that is. Who am I? What right have I to speak? Who will listen to me if I do? You're a unique human being, with a unique story to tell, and you have every right. If you speak with passion, many of us will listen. We need stories to live, all of us. We live by story. Yours enlarges the circle."

—Richard Rhodes, author of *How to Write*

## **Waking Up Your Muse**

Like creativity in any field—cooking, painting, gardening, or web design—creativity in writing involves the making of something new or the reinventing of something old. Being creative means causing something unique to come into existence and being original. It's seeing something in a different way and putting your own special stamp on it.

The power of creativity is within each one of us. The challenge is to open yourself up to it—to approach your subject in a new and interesting way. To practice being creative, you might try the following:

- Follow a new path; if you always take the same way home, choose a new route and treat your eyes to new views along the way.
- Really look at something you don't usually notice: the plumpness of a peach and its tender blush of color, the collage of patterns on the bark of a birch tree, the scents and sounds of the early morning.
- Immerse yourself in the arts: take up watercolors, master the art of French cuisine, learn a new language in a class or by listening to audiotapes, plant a flower bed, capture a sunrise with your camera.
- Immerse yourself in the world: listen to how people converse: in restaurants, on the subway, over coffee in the neighborhood café. Observe how people walk and dress; notice sounds and colors; experience silence; get the feel of busy streets, fields and forests, small towns, amusement parks—any variety of places and spaces that are accessible in your area.
- Let your imagination go: daydream, fantasize, play “What if,” make up stories about people you see walking down the street.
- Do something new: if you've always wondered what it would be like to play the accordion, take a lesson; if you've sometimes thought you might want to be a lawyer, sit in on a court case; if you like to sketch and doodle, sign up for an art class.
- Read, read, read: novels, newspapers, magazines, comics, brochures, cookbooks, poems, memoirs, how-to guides, travel essays; anything you can get your hands on.

## **Ten Keys to Creativity**

To sum up, what you need are the ten keys to creativity. Keep each one in mind as you begin to write.

1. Curiosity
2. Passion
3. Determination
4. Awareness
5. Energy
6. Openness
7. Sensitivity
8. Tenacity
9. A listening ear
10. An observant eye

## Keep Writing

But you might still have some nagging doubts. Can I really do this? How will I find the time? Will anyone want to read what I have to say? Won't people judge my work—and me?

Writing creatively isn't easy. It takes nerve and determination. But just about everyone has fears about doing it: from famous, bestselling authors to out-and-out beginners. How do they overcome these fears? They sit down and write.

They write every day. They write when the last thing they feel like doing is writing. They write as well as they can and they keep on going. They acknowledge their fears but they don't let fear stop them. Once they see that they can sit down and write, and live to write another day, their fears generally subside and come to have less of a hold on them.



"In the afternoons, Gertrude Stein and I used to go antique hunting in the local shops, and I remember once asking her if she thought I should become a writer. In the typically cryptic way we were all so enchanted with, she said, 'No.' I took that to mean yes and sailed for Italy the next day."

—Woody Allen, film director, musician, and author

You can overcome your fears in the same way—by writing. As much and as often as you can. But that answer presents another problem. How in the world are you going to find the time?

## You're Going to Make the Time

Make the time to write, carve it out even though you don't think you can, because writing is very important to you and because writing every day is the only way to improve your creative skills. As bestselling education author and screenwriter Murray Suid says, like any activity that you want to excel in, make

writing a habit.

Some writers find they can do their best work only at a certain time of day; others learn that they can start their engines whenever a free hour surfaces. Some of these authors establish a certain number of hours each day that they must pursue their craft. Others determine that they must write a certain number of words or pages at each session. Through writing you'll settle on your own best schedule and writing output goals. But you have to put in the time to find your answer.

If I want to set a goal of say, one page a day, how many words is that?



As a rule, you can estimate that one typed page of double-spaced writing is about 250 words.

If you have the luxury of choosing any part of the day or night to write, think about your style and your personality. Are you a morning person or a night person? Do you need structure and discipline to move forward with a project, or are you more easygoing in that you always get the job done, but you don't follow any rules?

If your life is already filled with career, family, volunteer work, and extracurriculars, you can still find time to write. It may be hard, but you can do it. Consider getting up a bit earlier than you usually do if you're a morning person. Nightlifers will find it easier to head to the writing table after dinner or after everyone else has gone to bed. Instead of going out to lunch every day, you can brown-bag it, close the office door (or go to the library or a park), and set aside that time to write.



Did you know that Fred Terman, known as the Father of Silicon Valley, was also a writer? With his busy schedule as Dean of the School of Engineering at Stanford and involvement in the establishment of the Stanford Research Park, Terman didn't find much time to write. But he told friends that by writing just one page a day, at the end of a year he would write a book.

On weekends, try setting aside a bigger block of time to create. Think about enlisting friends or family members who might be able to take over chores for you or who you might be able to trade services with. Babysitters, dog walkers, and gardeners are also available; the expense may be high, but the cost to you of not writing may be higher. By sitting down and really studying what you do and when you do it, you'll likely find some daily time that you can dedicate to your craft.

## **Prepare in Advance**

One of the best ways you can help yourself is to be prepared to write each time you do sit down to do it. That means having your pencils already sharpened or enough ink and paper for the printer or your computer glitch fixed or your children off at the park with a neighbor. Every minute counts on a tight schedule, and you don't want to lose even one of them hunting for the pencil sharpener or being interrupted by someone who needs to know where the hammer is. (Once you determine what your regular writing hours will be, it's a good idea to advise friends and family so they're less likely to call you then or knock on your door—and to keep doing so firmly and consistently. It's also a good idea to write those hours into your daily calendar, just as you write in all your other commitments, so that you don't schedule other activities in those spots.)

You can also be prepared by keeping your current project in the back of your mind at nonwriting times (actually, it will most likely stay there whether you want it to or not). While you're mowing the lawn you can be working out a piece of dialogue or a difficult plot point and have it ready to go when you're next able to pick up your pen.

## **Flex Your Writing Muscle**

Another way that you can keep your hand in shape during nonofficial writing times is to hone your writing skills in other ways. Remember that thing that people used to do before e-mail, called writing letters? Getting in touch with a friend by putting pen to stationery is a great way to practice the art of creative writing. You can describe what you've been up to, relay a funny anecdote, recall the good times you spent together—anything that lets you write in an original way. Many famous authors, including Thomas Mann and Henry James, corresponded often with friends and colleagues, which gave them a chance to keep in touch and exchange ideas while exercising their writing muscles. You can also keep a journal that records thoughts and feelings, and even use it to record ideas you later turn into stories or essays.

In a nutshell, do everything you can possibly do to give yourself the time, space, inner reserves, and positive attitude you need to channel your creativity into a positive stream that will fuel improved skills.

## **The Jarring Js—Jealousy and Judgment**

Fear of what others will think—and say—is a major force that holds a lot of

writers back. But jealousy can be just as big a problem, though often an unexpected one. Some authors, as they start to produce copy, compare their work to others' and find themselves and their own work lacking. This can be not only a terrible blow to the ego, but can encourage feelings of anger toward people who appear to be doing better work or having greater success.

But guess what? It's okay to be angry. It's okay to be jealous. (Even therapists say this is true.) Instead of letting those feelings take over your psyche and stop you from writing, you need to channel them into a positive stream that will serve as fuel to improve your skills.



"Many wonderful writers . . . have been plagued by insecurity throughout their professional lives. How could it be otherwise? By its nature, art involves risk. It's not easy, but sometimes one has to invent one's confidence. . . . My own advice to writers is: follow your curiosity and your passion."

—Diane Ackerman, author of *A Natural History of the Senses*

A positive attitude is one of the writer's greatest tools—jealousy may sidetrack you, but believing in yourself and not comparing your writing to anyone else's will take you a long way. Like the Little Engine That Could, you've got to keep saying, "I think I can, I think I can."

## Prepare for Criticism

While most of the time you should be able to control your own green-eyed monster, it will often be impossible to control the judgmental or critical words of others. Having others review what you write can be incredibly useful and supportive, in fact, you'll probably seek out certain people—other writers, teachers, writing group colleagues—to give you feedback and to discuss problems or concepts (see Chapter 21, for more on this).



If you make the decision to let friends, family members, or colleagues read your work, you have to realize that you are opening yourself to both positive and negative critiques.

Sometimes you'll hear more—or less—than you were hoping for. To prepare yourself for this, try to remember that it's your work—not you—that's being judged. And keep in mind that no matter how forceful the person's words or how right they may seem when you hear them, *you* are the final judge of what you create. It is *your* work, and while you may choose to listen to all who are willing to comment on what you write, you can accept their ideas if they make sense to you and use them to improve your skills, or you can reject them and carry on as you have been. It's a fact of life that you can never please everyone,



but it's critical that in your writing you please yourself. In the end, *you* are your own best judge.

## Choose Your Format

Part of preparing yourself to write is figuring out what type of writing you are going to be doing. The dictum here is simple: Write what you know, in a format you're familiar with. Suspense novelist Abigail Padgett says that she became a mystery writer not only because she thinks her brain is "genetically predisposed" to spooky rhythms and sounds, but because she's read countless books by P. D. James, Dorothy Sayers, Amanda Cross, and scores of other female mystery writers. She loved their words and learned from their techniques, and through them developed her own special writing style.

If you grew up in a family whose idea of a great time was to attend a Broadway show (lucky you), you may be familiar with the ins and outs of dramas or musicals and want to try your hand at creating a play. Or you may be an ardent admirer of the short story and have a bookcase filled with gems you read by Margaret Atwood, Tim O'Brien, Akhil Sharma, Alice Adams, and Stephen King. The short story, then, might be your format of choice.



To further develop your feel for formats, try reading several works written in each area. Award winners or books that friends or colleagues recommend to you are good places to start, and many examples are provided here as well.

If you're pursuing creative writing because you want to punch up your business documents or tell others compellingly about your recent trip to Bali, then the format you'll work with is already set. But even if you're thoroughly familiar with a particular form and think you want to follow its framework, or need to concentrate on a particular type for business or other reasons, you still may want to consider several different formats before you sit down and start to compose. Once you do start to write, you may find, like Anton Chekhov, Oscar Wilde, and many other successful authors, that one form influences and enriches another, and you work happily in several of them. Remember that writing creatively not only involves being original in your words, but being open to new genres and writing styles.

## The Writing Process

Every piece of writing, no matter its style or format—poem, short story, travel article, science fiction novel—takes hard work and time to go from notion to concept to reality. Creativity gets the ball rolling, and then careful crafting enables you to produce a finished work that expresses clearly, dramatically, accurately, and with originality the story you want to tell. The seven steps of the writing process—getting ideas, planning, researching, organizing, drafting, editing, and evaluating—will take you from thinking about writing to producing a satisfying work of art. Keep in mind, though, that writing is usually not an A-B-C process. Most likely you’ll find that you zigzag through the different steps on your way to creating a finished piece.

At every step along the way, and in every line and paragraph you write, you’ll be making decisions that will affect the final outcome. These decisions will involve asking yourself a lot of questions: Would my character say this? How can I be sure this date is correct? This word isn’t quite right—what would be a better one? Is this scene really necessary? How can I show that Alice is recalling a conversation with Georgia and Lexy while she’s speaking with Nick and Alan?

At first all these decisions may seem overwhelming, but the more you write—and rewrite—the better feel you’ll have for how to make them. Plus, reading works of other writers, and reading extensively in the format you’ve chosen, will help you understand how a good piece of writing is put together.

You’ll also find that it can be difficult to keep going. At times you may have to coax, tease, or drag those thoughts and words from your imagination onto the page. As author Anne Lamott says, writers “will have days at the desk of frantic boredom, of angry hopelessness, of wanting to quit forever, and there will be days when it feels like they have caught and are riding a wave.” It can be incredibly frustrating. But the rewards of the writing life are waiting.

## Chapter 2. The Short Story

Many fiction authors start out writing short stories as their first venture into the world of creative writing. Although this genre seems relatively easy to work with, writing a short story requires great skill. So what exactly is a short story?

### It's Not Just a *Short Story*

What defines a short story? Is it simply a short novel? What's the difference between a short story and a novella? Most writers, editors, and publishers categorize a short story as a work of fiction comprised of several thousand words, but generally not more than 5,000. The novella is usually thought of as a longer short story or a short novel and can range from 5,000 to more than 40,000 words.



E. B. White's sparsely worded but extraordinary "The Second Tree from the Corner" takes up barely five pages in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* collection; Ernest Hemingway's magnificent *The Old Man and the Sea* is generally found in book form and classified as a novella.

Marian Gavin, author of "The Sparrow's Mother," calls the short story "bits and pieces of life, the brightest and the darkest. . . . Ideally, a short story is Life in a capsule." The key word to understanding the short story format is "story"—in just a few words the best short stories tell us a tale of sight, sound, thought, and action that helps us to understand and relate to a compelling moment. What we learn from what the characters say and do during that decisive moment gives us insight into the human condition and builds our humanity. (More on characters, plot, dialogue, and setting can be found in Chapter 3.)

### The Short Story Versus the Novel

In their own ways, both short stories and novels help people to understand themselves and the universe, but they do so in markedly different ways. Of course, the most obvious difference is length, but this is not the only important distinction. Whereas a novel might center on one central story and several side stories that can span an extended period of time, generally the action in a short

story revolves around just one incident that happens during a brief period of time. In “The Second Tree from the Corner,” most of the story unfolds while the main character, Trexler, talks with his doctor during an office visit. The remainder of the story is told to readers by briefly touching on several of Trexler’s later visits to the doctor, with the wonderfully satisfying conclusion coming just five weeks after the story began.

Another difference between the short story and the novel is the number of characters. Typically, a short story will focus on only one or a few characters, whereas a novel may give us half a dozen or more. In “The Second Tree from the Corner,” only Trexler and his doctor inhabit the pages. In Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “The Key,” readers follow the harrowing day of an elderly woman named Bessie, hearing only a few words from a neighbor and an apartment superintendent and feeling the hovering presence of Bessie’s dead husband Sam.

## Dialogue

Good fiction that contains no dialogue, only pure narration, does exist, but well-written, realistic dialogue can be a great addition to the telling of any story. After all, dialogue is conversation, and what better way to tell a story than by having the characters speak the words? If a plot is peopled with interesting, appealing characters, it is very likely that readers will want to know what they have to say. (Dialogue is particularly important to movie and play scripts; for more on writing for the movies, see Chapter 6.)

Dialogue serves two purposes in a short story (and in other fiction formats as well)—to deepen our understanding of the characters and their personalities and to further develop the plot. Through dialogue readers add another important layer to their picture of the author’s fictional creations, get a clearer idea of the plot as characters talk about incidents or conflicts and say how they feel about them, and are better able to differentiate among these characters. Dialogue also works to liven up any scene and gives it a greater sense of reality.

When characters speak, they give us an indirect line into their minds and their makeup. In fact, author Rita Mae Brown calls fictional speech a “literary biopsy.” It shows if characters are argumentative or easygoing, if they’re happy or sad, what they like and don’t like, their goals and dreams, how educated they are, where they come from, whether they’re eccentric or down-home, their fears, and their past. Everything about characters can be revealed in their speech.



A related literary device is the monologue—when a character talks to him- or herself. Interior monologues and dialogues can point out a character’s uncertainty, inner turmoil, feelings of self-worth or self-loathing, excitement, and anger—the full range of emotions and thoughts.

## **Viewpoint**

Viewpoint is another area in which short stories and longer fiction often differ. While a novel may have several viewpoints—in Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain*, both of the lead characters tell us their take on the fascinating story of how they met, separated, and eventually reconnected—the short story generally doesn’t have the luxury of space in which to do this. Varying viewpoints can also disrupt the strong, immediate identification that readers need to feel with short-story characters.

## **Pacing**

Still another aspect of the short story that is crucial is pacing. Because there are fewer sentences than in a novella or novel, each must move the story forward in some way. If you take pages to describe the main character and set the scene for what will unfold, time will run out before you get to the main elements, and the reader will become impatient to discover how the issues will be resolved. Short-story writers need to jump right into their subject and keep right on going.

## **Which Brings You to the End**

The best short story endings resolve the conflicts that have been ongoing in a way that shows how the characters, or the situation, have changed. Effective endings satisfy readers and often surprise them. “A Jury of Her Peers,” first written by Susan Glaspell in 1916 as a one-act play and then later rewritten by her into short-story format, is about two Midwestern women portrayed as “dutiful wives” to their law-enforcement husbands’ way of thinking. In the course of the story, these women learn about a wife accused of murdering her husband. Though they know her only slightly, they come to understand her

completely through the state of her home and the evidence only they see there. In the end, they do an extraordinary thing—something they know to be wrong but in the situation completely right. The ending makes you catch your breath and smile at the same time.

## In Short

To sum it all up, short stories generally have:

- A simple subject, usually one that lets the story take place within a brief period of time
- Only a few characters that are quickly developed
- Dialogue and action that move the story forward
- One point of view
- A fast-paced, reader-grabbing beginning
- A middle that doesn't ramble but proceeds in a direct route to the end
- A strong ending that completes the story and provides understanding and satisfaction
- A plot and characters that gives the reader insight into the human condition

Although some short stories do often depict a “day in the life” of a character, they are not the same as slice-of-life pieces or personal essays. Short stories have a beginning, middle and end—even the short, short stories, often called “flash fiction.”



“A short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build towards it.”

—Edgar Allan Poe, poet, short-story writer, and literary critic

The short story is an excellent and challenging format in its own right, but it has also worked as the training ground for many great novelists. Writing a successful short story may eventually lead to your writing longer and more complex pieces.

## Short Story Starters

The beginning of a piece sets the tone of the story, introduces the characters, and, of course, grabs the reader's attention. Take a look at the following well-known

beginning, from “The Necklace” by Guy de Maupassant:

*She was one of those pretty and charming girls born, as though fate had blundered over her, into a family of artisans. She had no marriage portion, no expectations, no means of getting known, understood, loved, and wedded by a man of wealth and distinction; and she let herself be married off to a clerk in the Ministry of Education.*

Choose one of the following jumping-off points or create one of your own, and write a 1,000-word story that develops the concept. Who knows, you might end up with a great tale.

- A huge storm is approaching and a family must shelter an unwelcome guest.
- Three teenagers set off for a day at the beach.
- While visiting her ailing father, a middle-aged woman has a telling memory.
- Watching a football game with his wife reveals an important truth about their relationship to a young husband.

## **A Great, Gripping End**

Equally important, and a challenge to write, is the short-story ending. Try to affect a sense of closure, without going overboard on the melodrama. Here’s the ending to James Thurber’s well-known story, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” in which the main character’s mundane life is “spiced up” by a series of daydreams in which he is always the hero.

*They went out through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them. It was two blocks to the parking lot. At the drugstore on the corner she said, “Wait here for me. I forgot something. I won’t be a minute.” She was more than a minute. Walter Mitty lighted a cigarette. It began to rain, rain with sleet in it. He stood up against the wall of the drugstore, smoking. . . . He put his shoulders back and his heels together. “To hell with the handkerchief,” said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last.*

Did this strong ending inspire you to write? For other great endings, check

out these outstanding short stories:

- “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien
- “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry
- “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving
- “Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield
- “The Speckled Band” by Arthur Conan Doyle
- “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe
- “The Manchester Marriage” by Elizabeth Gaskell
- “Bright and Morning Star” by Richard Wright
- “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka
- “The Great Good Place” by Henry James
- “If You Sing Like That for Me” by Akhil Sharma
- “The Piano Tuner” by Peter Meinke



## Chapter 3. The Novel

From *Don Quixote* to *The Great Gatsby*, great novels capture your imagination and take you into a world all their own. Although you've probably heard of the main genres— romance, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, thriller, literary, and western—you might not know that there are also countless sub-genres (like historical romance) and cross-genres (like science fiction romance).

### A Novel Definition

To nineteenth-century writer Ambrose Bierce, the novel was simply “a short story padded.” If you already write short stories or novellas, thinking about a novel in those terms can help to take away some of the doubt and fear you may be having if you're considering this kind of undertaking. While it is absolutely true that writing a novel is no easy task—bestselling crime author Mary Higgins Clark characterized the first four months of writing one of her novels as “scratching with my hands through granite”—approaching the novel as simply another form for telling a story may be just the incentive you need. If you have a lot you want to say and need some room in which to say it, the novel may be right for you. (Be courageous and read on.)

Novels, which currently attract more writers than any other literary form, are believed to have come into existence around 1200 b.c. Two notable examples from Egypt at that time are *The Predestined Prince* and *Sinube*. Following a number of novel-like stories written in Japanese in the early part of the first millennium (including, most notably, *The Tale of Genji* ), the stories that eventually became the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, or *The Thousand and One Nights*, were begun. These stories were eventually established as a group between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries and were read widely in Europe early in the eighteenth century. In 1605, Miguel Cervantes published the first part of *Don Quixote*. By the time Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* came into the world, in 1719, the modern novel had come into its own. By the end of that century, it had become a major literary form.

While there are several elements that are key to every type of novel— theme, characters, plot, setting, and dialogue—different authors have different ways of mixing these ingredients together. Some lean on a story line, which then

determines the characters that will populate it. Others begin with a character or two in mind, and then develop a story to wrap around them. Some can't stop thinking about a particular piece of conversation, perhaps an angry exchange between a police officer and a motorist that they overheard, and that becomes the impetus for their story. Other writers experience an event or a place that sets their inventive minds in motion. The elements of a novel can come together in many different ways, but it's necessary that every element be strong and work smoothly with all the others.

## **What's Your Theme?**

Early in your writing, you'll want to think about your novel's focus, or theme. What is the purpose of your tale? What is the main point? Every novel has a theme, which is either stated or, more often, unveiled along with the story. Often the theme involves an insight about relationships or about life that the characters in the story discover through the situations they encounter and the ways they react to them.

For example, in William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*, a novel about a young girl and her difficult family who face great pain and tragedy, the theme is that love must endure if people are to endure. Jon Hassler's wonderful novel *North of Hope* centers on a priest who goes home after twenty years of missionary work to find there are few believers left in town, as well as people he loved facing problems at every turn. The theme here, the reader discovers by the book's end, is that faith—of varying kinds—can see people through their greatest despair.

## **How Do You Decide on a Theme?**

A theme may already be roaming around in the back of your mind, or there may be an issue important to you that you don't yet realize is a theme but actually is one. For example, you may have a child who plays in the local soccer league, and her team has never won a game. But your daughter just loves getting up on Saturday mornings to meet her teammates and play as hard as she can—and she loves the big pancake breakfast that your family shares after every game. You really admire how she gives her sport her all—even though it's clear she's not going to end up with a trophy or a plaque. Here you can find a theme for a novel: winning isn't everything.

Themes are all around you. Check your personal life, check your beliefs, and check the newspaper. Have you recently read about a fire that caused dozens of strangers to help the victim? Your novel could revolve around the point that disaster can bring out the best in people. Or maybe you know about a young couple who went through endless struggles to adopt an orphan—a terrific example of “love conquers all.”

As you think of different themes, jot them down and consider them. Which one really resonates? Which feels like the right one for conveying something that’s important to you? You probably won’t want to actually write the words anywhere in your story, but by settling on a theme you’ll give your novel direction and purpose, and have the basis for your characters, setting, and plot.

Themes often involve abstract ideas. The following list is based on Merrill Goddard’s *What Interests People and Why*.

- Love
- Hate
- Fear
- Vanity
- Wrong-doing
- Morality
- Selfishness
- Immortality
- Superstition
- Curiosity
- Veneration
- Ambition
- Culture
- Heroism
- Discovery
- Amusement

## **About Characters**

When you create characters, you want to make sure they’re believable and enjoyable (even if they’re bad guys). “Flat” main characters (those you only describe in one-dimension, such as physical appearance), can’t carry a book. No matter how strong the plot or theme, undeveloped characters will leave the reader feeling bored, confused, or both.

Characters, of course, don't have to be people. They can be robots or animals or toadstools or ghosts. But whoever or whatever they are, they have to come across as real. As you're bringing your characters to life, try to think of them as actual people (or robots or whatever) with a history, a personality, and a will of their own.

## Types of Characters

Most novels contain two types of characters: major and minor. Major characters are the ones we learn all about and grow to love or hate. They're complex, convincing personalities with a paralyzing fear of dogs and a weakness for Belgian chocolates; they are impatient driving a car and happiest when at the beach. They're in most or all of a novel's scenes and are the focus of the plot. They're the characters we can't wait to encounter again when we happily curl up with the book we can hardly stand to put down.



Generally, major characters include two key figures: the protagonist, or principle character around whom much of the story flows, and the antagonist, or the character who tries his or her utmost to make the protagonist's life hell.

The following list, which is by no means inclusive, provides some excellent examples of successfully written and memorable main characters.

- Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind* (by Margaret Mitchell)
- Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (by Thomas Harris)
- The whale in *Moby Dick* (by Herman Melville)
- Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited* (by Evelyn Waugh)
- Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* series
- Mr. Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (by Charles Dickens)
- Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* (by Emily Brontë)

Minor characters, as their name implies, receive much less attention. Some play such small roles that we hardly get to know them at all—they populate the pages just to bring tea or give travel directions or be a clerk in a shop when a main character comes in. But some minor characters can play a bigger part, supporting a main character in something he's trying to accomplish or acting as his opposite to point out his features and flaws. Minor characters can also be used to propel the plot. For example, the novelist may supply a victim for the villain in order to show us how bad the villain really is. For characters like this,

you'll need to develop a fairly complete profile so that readers come to know at least a good number of things about them.

## The Plot Line

The characters in a novel can't exist in a vacuum. To become concrete, three-dimensional people to readers, they must be placed into situations that let them act and react, move forward and backward, learn, live, and grow. In other words, they need a plot—they need something to happen to them.



"Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are, if you sit and write about two people you know and are getting to know better day by day, something is bound to happen."

—Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird*

Plots in novels run the gamut and then some, but most have five essential elements:

1. The introduction of the characters
2. A trigger event that disrupts the life of the main character and sets the story in motion; often the trigger event causes conflict or a problem that the main character must resolve
3. A series of events that the main character goes through on the way to solving the problem
4. A climax, or moment of great intensity, when the main character either succeeds or fails at overcoming the problem
5. An anticlimax, or resolution, in which calm returns to the main character's life

The plot is the story and the elements are its structure. If you think about novels you've read, you can probably identify their structure, or the plot points as they're sometimes called. Think about the Charles Dickens's classic *Oliver Twist* :

1. **The introduction:** At the beginning, you meet Oliver as a baby, his just-dead mother, the parish beadle Bumble, and the other characters who inhabit the poor farm where the orphan Oliver is sent to live.
2. **The trigger event:** An older, hungry Oliver makes the dreadful mistake of asking for a second bowl of porridge and is sent away to work for a casket maker, where he is badly mistreated.
3. **The events:** Oliver runs off, joins a gang of young thieves who

work for a master thief named Fagin, gets caught in his first attempt as a pickpocket, is taken home and cared for by the man whose pocket he tried to pick, is recaptured by Fagin, shot, taken in by the people whose house he tried to rob, stalked by Fagin, and reunited with his first benefactor. (Whew, what a childhood!)

4. **The climax:** The girlfriend of one of the thieves overhears a plot between Fagin and a man named Monks to keep secret Oliver's true identity (Oliver is the son of his benefactor's late best friend), and to keep Oliver from getting the money he should have inherited. The girlfriend is killed, the thief hangs himself, and Fagin is hanged after revealing where the papers are that prove Oliver's heritage. (Whew, again!)

5. **The anticlimax:** Oliver is adopted by his benefactor, receives his inheritance, and lives happily ever after.

## The Subplot

Minor characters should also play important parts in various conflicts and plot points. Moreover, both the main characters and the secondary characters can be involved in subplots.

Subplots interweave with the main plot to give additional information or reinforce information about characters. In Elizabeth Strout's *Amy and Isabelle*, the plot revolves around a mother and her daughter and how their relationship changes over the course of a year. But as you see Amy and Isabelle struggling to understand and forgive each other, you learn, from several subplots, more about both women from the friends they spend time with. By helping one friend through the disintegration of her marriage, Isabelle is finally able to open up about an early love affair that affected her entire life. Through daughter Amy's relationship with a sometimes-wild girlfriend, you learn that, though Amy is experimenting and pushing at her mother-imposed boundaries, at heart she knows the right thing to do. The outside relationships of both mother and daughter enrich your understanding of these main characters.

## Chronological Disorder

As the plot and its subplots carry the characters along, they generally move in a direct, chronological line to the story's conclusion. But some authors like to play

with time by introducing flashbacks or through a nonlinear plot line.

What is a flashback?



A flashback (usually presented as a sudden memory) is a literary device that reveals an event that happened earlier in the story. It can be an effective way to give readers information that helps them better understand a character or a plot point, though many editors will advise against this technique because it is somewhat cliché.

A nonlinear plot is simply a plot that is presented to the reader out of chronological order. That is, the story may jump back and forth in time to relate characters to events in the past or future, or it may even begin with the end. For example, readers are greeted with a dying man, and then shown the course of events that brought him to his end. Linear and nonlinear plots are both excellent formats, but the nonlinear plot needs extra attention to make the time or character jumps work.

When working with a nonlinear plot, write out the sequence of events in chronological order. No matter how broken up chronologically your novel may be, the story that you are writing is still embedded in time. Keeping the progression of events clear in your head will help you get your story across to the readers.

## More on Dialogue

Dialogue is just as important in a novel as it is in a short story (refer to the section on dialogue in Chapter 2). In addition to unveiling characters, dialogue reveals and furthers the plot line. For example, dialogue is a particularly effective device in crime and suspense novels. From the interaction and exchanges of characters, bits of the story are intricately woven together. Bad guys and good guys actually tell you how and where things are going as they talk to each other and themselves. Crime novels often contain a good deal of dialogue because it links the many people and actions that are key to solving the crime.

Good dialogue must be clear, believable, natural, not too long, unpredictable, forceful, and snappy. That's some tall order. But just think about exchanges you've read and enjoyed that made you stop to think about or savor what was said. You know who is talking. You understand what they say. They speak in a way that suits and illustrates their character. They speak the way real people speak, with some long, complete sentences, some sentence fragments, some *oh s* and *well s*. They sometimes say outrageous things, or get excited or angry or sad. They speak to the point. And they're not boring.

## Practice Writing Dialogue

To practice writing good dialogue, try the following exercise. Pick one of these topics (or one of your own creation) and spend five minutes writing dialogue for the characters. Try to concentrate on creating natural but interesting conversation. Mix sentences and sentence fragments, and don't let each character go on for too long. When you've finished, read what you wrote out loud.

- A couple has just been mugged; they're scared but not hurt. What would they say to each other?
- A man tells his best friends about his wife's infidelity. How would they respond?
- A woman is watching her young child play in the park. What is she thinking to herself?
- Two preteen girls are planning to sneak out after bedtime. What are they saying?

## Interview with Literary Novelist Susanne Pari

Accomplished, creative authors stir together theme, characters, plot, setting, and dialogue until they cook up a winning combination that satisfyingly tells their tale. By studying their styles and frameworks, and by practicing your craft, you'll develop your own sense of story and find the combination that works for you. The following interview with literary novelist Susanne Pari will provide you with more helpful hints and answer other questions you might have about writing a novel.

Susanne Pari began her writing career as a journalist and has been published in the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Boston Globe*. Her first novel, *The Fortune Catcher*, sets a compelling love story against the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution.

### **Q: How did you get started as a fiction writer?**

**A:** I would say my interest in writing began with my interest in storytelling because, to me, that's what fiction is: storytelling. Long before I understood that I wanted to write fiction, which didn't occur to me until I was in my twenties and already a journalist, I had an inexhaustible desire to listen to people's stories—even the most mundane—and to make stories up in my mind. I don't mean just



daydreaming. I mean daydreams replete with beginning, middle, end, and a great deal of dialogue. Daydreams I revised over and over. I didn't realize this was a little weird until a friend pointed it out to me.

Somewhere along the way, several of my editors at newspapers where I worked and at journalism school where I obtained a master's degree suggested that I might consider writing fiction. Truth be told, I was not a very good journalist; "just the facts" was not enough for me. Later, in my thirties, when I had already begun writing fiction without any sense of craft, I attended the Squaw Valley Community of Writers' Conference, where I met my mentor, Molly Giles, who led me into the world of fiction writing and fiction writers.

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**Q: *The Fortune Catcher* is set in Iran. Did you need to do a lot of research?**

**A:** All works require some amount of research. It could be gathering historical information or studying the map of the town where your characters live or asking your mother to tell you a story from her childhood. I am a stickler for accuracy. I allow only my characters and their private thoughts and scenes to be total fiction—everything that takes place in the "real" world must be authentic. *The Fortune Catcher* takes place during the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. While I relied a great deal on interviews with people who experienced the Revolution firsthand, I always checked their stories against news articles and nonfiction books. Amnesty International was also invaluable; they provided me with videotapes and statistics I couldn't have found elsewhere. I also do research on my characters. I have several psychologist friends to whom I put questions regarding behavior.

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**Q: Do you work from an outline or just start typing?**

**A:** First, I have an idea—a germ—for a story. It's a very concise, unblurred idea that looks in my mind like a movie trailer. There are a couple of main characters who begin at some point and end at another. For some reason, the ending of the novel is what appears most clearly to me. The writing of the novel is about getting to that ending point. Beyond this, I don't outline. Sometimes I wonder if I should, and there have been occasions when I tried to—usually when I was in the middle of a novel and steeped in hundreds of pages that made no linear sense. But I've found that, for me, outlining takes me out of the story; I

prefer that the characters lead me through the maze. I don't mean that these characters come from somewhere other than my own confused brain, but I have faith that if I understand them psychologically, their actions, which drive the story, will become apparent.

• • •

**Q: What inspired the idea and characters in *The Fortune Catcher* ?**

**A:** My imagination, which is based entirely on my experiences in life. It's sort of like that *Fiddler on the Roof* song: "A little bit of this. A little bit of that." I may begin with a character who is based on someone in real life. Then as I write, the character's traits diverge, either in experience or demeanor, from that real person. For example, in *The Fortune Catcher*, the main character, Layla, is based on me. You might say that her ideology is the same as mine. However, her experiences aren't mine at all. Like Layla, I lived in Iran as a child, my husband is my best friend from childhood, my mother is American and part Jewish, but my mother is very much alive. Her family never disowned her, my father's family didn't treat her badly, and my own grandmother was not a fanatic, though she was very devout. I didn't go back to Iran after the Revolution, and I wasn't tortured.

For me, the characters are what drive the plot. Sure, the germ of a novel or a short story is a dramatic story, but the characters are the pistons that drive the engine of plot. This is why I tell my students to write their characters "in full:" get to know them first by writing, without stopping or revising, as if they were describing a new friend whom they're getting to know little by little. Most of this writing will not appear in the final draft of a story, but without this kind of analysis, characters tend to be two-dimensional and therefore uninteresting to the reader.

Character analysis also often leads to the discovery of plot. For example, a writer may have an idea to write about a young woman who is forced into an arranged marriage, endures years of unhappiness, and finally develops the strength to divorce. This is a story that could take many twists and turns and offer a lot of dramatic dialogue and touching scenes, but without a full analysis of the main character—I mean, getting to know her as if she exists, right down to the color of nail polish she prefers and how much salt she puts into her food—the story would fall flat. Once a writer knows her characters inside and out, the story is formed and informed by them, by their reactions to situations the writer places in their paths; they make the story believable by their thoughts and actions.

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**Q: What does it take to create great dialogue?**

**A:** Listening. Eavesdropping shamelessly. Talking to yourself. Talking out loud as your characters. Being in that imaginary scene with your characters, sipping their coffee, swallowing their saliva, feeling their goose bumps, smelling their air. For me, if I enter the scene in my imagination, the dialogue comes easily. I love writing dialogue—pages and pages of it. But once it's written, dialogue must be edited heavily. Truth be told, dialogue on the page is NOT like dialogue in real life. It is sparser. It is like the difference between the transcript of a conversation, with all its *uh* s and repeated words and dangling phrases, and a summary of the same conversation written by a third person.

• • •

**Q: What can beginning writers do to encourage their creativity and work on their skills?**

**A:** Take writing classes offered by sensitive, kind writing teachers. Take workshops led by sensitive, kind writing mentors. I have no tolerance for harsh criticism—it is destructive. Your writing is your heart; it should be handled with care. That's not to say that a beginning writer should only receive glowing praise for every word she writes. Criticism is essential to revision, and revision is essential for publication. A class or workshop should help a writer discover flaws in their manuscript; flaws are a fact of life and of writing, and if you can't accept that as truth you are writing for the wrong reasons. A teacher, mentor, and classmates are there to assist the writer in much the same way a nurse is there to help the doctor. But if a writer leaves a workshop session feeling the way she did after gym class in middle school if she wasn't athletic, then the workshop isn't doing her any good. Classes and workshops should inspire writers to revise or to submit their writing.

• • •

**Q: How do you deal with rejection?**

**A:** Rejection is a big part of being a writer, most profoundly where fiction is involved. In fact, once I began writing fiction, I couldn't bring myself to submit anything anywhere. Fiction comes from the heart, the soul, or whatever you want to call that very deep and private place that is what I think of as a creative womb. When a writer offers an editor—a stranger—the fruit of this

womb, it's like offering your child for evaluation. If rejection is the result, it hurts like hell. But there is no getting around it; if you don't submit your work, you'll never see it in print. If that's not what you're after, more power to you, just write.

I can say with complete assurance, though, that rejection can be gotten used to. The more you submit, the more you come to understand the mechanics of rejection: that it is based mostly on the subjective opinion of one human being. If an editor isn't interested in arranged marriages, chances are she won't be interested in your story about arranged marriages; after all, she only has time to read the first few paragraphs, if that. Or maybe the editor published a story about arranged marriage three months ago and her magazine won't let her do it again so soon. Or maybe she's been in an arranged marriage herself and can't face the intricacies of it on the page. Or maybe she has a stomachache from her sushi lunch with a whiny author and her foul mood compels her to lash out and say no to someone, and your manuscript happens to be on her desk.

When rejection comes, don't blame yourself or your writing. Move on and submit to the next editor on your list. The more rejections you collect, strangely, the more committed you can become to your writing. You begin to separate the act of submitting from the act of writing, instead of having one influence the other.

## Chapter 4. Books for Prereaders

What do you do when your readers are too young to read? You rely on illustrations, interactive components, and catchy words and sentences. Successful books for babies and toddlers capture their attention and help them learn about the world.

### It's Not Child's Play

Many new-to-the-form writers think that writing a children's book will be an easy way to launch their writing career. Books for kids are usually much shorter than books for adults, some even have only a few words, so they must be much easier to write, right? While it's true that several categories of children's books contain mostly pictures, writing for children can be quite a challenge. Not only do authors need to have the skills and understanding of an adult, but they must also be able to see things from a child's point of view—through the awareness of an on-the-move, curiosity-crazed toddler or the eyes of an experimenting, wondering teen.



The best children's books are not simply adult books taken down a notch or two; they speak with a voice their particular audience connects with and understands. They, too, are works of literature.

Today's—and many of yesterday's—children's books are not just fluff. When you think of a children's book, you may be imagining a few pages of pictures of brightly colored birds and elephants, with a bit of silly copy here and there. But many children's books—for young ones as well as teens—can focus on social, emotional, economic, racial, environmental, and other important issues that teach and encourage children as well as entertain them.

To create successful books for children, authors need to keep in mind for whom they're writing. To tune in to that audience, writers think back to their own childhood and try to remember their favorite toys, colors, games, and interests—and also their emotions, language, and feelings. Of course, very few people can remember much about their earliest years, but for those who think they want to write for the very youngest, watching them and learning what fascinates, upsets, and pleases them can help adult authors get the feel of what

it's like to be a child. Reading classics that have been beloved by generations of youngsters is also a great way to learn what's important to children. Remembering your own favorites, and what it was about them that so caught you up in their world, will help to focus your fiction.



Until the mid-eighteenth century, there were few books written specifically for children. One of the first people to recognize the demand for children's books was John Newbery, a bookselling author after whom today's prestigious Newbery Award for children's books by American authors is named.

## **Children's Book Categories**

Children's books are generally divided into categories determined by the readers' age. Some authors specialize in only one area because that's the time period they remember best and feel most at home with. They may also write for a certain age group because they're writing for their own children's tastes. Others create for two or three age spans that they are comfortable writing about and because that means they will be in touch with a wider audience. If you think you're interested in writing for children, try to stay open to the different possibilities, not only in audience but also in format. Children everywhere love to get their hands—dirty or not—on great fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and plays.

### **Books for Babies**

While it will be years before infants can read, they very much enjoy the sounds of words being read to them. Parents who want to provide a rich, sensory environment for their newborns and babies look for books that appeal to the newborn ear. Many of the best contain rhythmic words and sounds that interest and stimulate or that reassure and soothe, thereby helping babies relate to and bond with their family. Books for babies are often illustrated collections of lullabies, nursery rhymes, and tales that can be read or sung to the very young. Two outstanding examples of baby books are Linda Saport's *All the Pretty Little Horses*, a lullaby book, and Kay Chorao's *The Baby's Lap Book*, filled with fifty favorite nursery rhymes.

### **Books for Toddlers**

Once they're up and running, toddlers are into everything, including listening to

well-worded and nicely illustrated stories that catch their ears and eyes. Because these kids may not sit still for long, books for toddlers usually focus on a very brief story or subject and have lots of large, bright pictures that children can quickly take in. To encourage development of language skills, use simple words that tell toddlers the story, and incorporate rhyme and repetition that children can learn from.

One very good example of a book for toddlers is *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown. It's a classic bedtime story that seems to find its way to baby showers around the globe.

## Including Mom and Dad

Books for toddlers often focus on a familiar and important relationship for young kids—the one between baby and parent. A favorite that includes three generations of family (baby, parents, big sisters, and grandmother) is Karen Katz's *Counting Kisses*. The book teaches about love—and counting!—in very few words.



Toddler books that focus on this key relationship also speak to children when the characters come from the animal world. Good examples of little books about animal families are *Little Bird Biddle Bird*, written and illustrated by David Kirk, and *Guess How Much I Love You* by Sam McBratney.

## Think Format

Some books for toddlers are not so much stories as introductions to words and concepts. Some are even wordless and offer brightly colored illustrations. Many books by Richard Scarry are popular with one-and two-year-olds for their silly animal characters and the simple words they present. Scarry's *Best First Book Ever* is a treasure chest of 700 words that toddlers can hear, see illustrated, and learn about in short or longer bursts.



Books for babies and toddlers are sometimes called “board books” because the pages are made of durable cardboard to stand up to drool and rough handling.

Another bestselling children's book—remarkably, more than sixty years after it was first published—is *Pat the Bunny*, a tiny tome from Dorothy Kunhardt that invites crawlers and toddlers to learn words by patting and playing with them. Each page encourages kids to participate in learning while enjoying

the fun of sniffing a scented paper flower, playing peek-a-boo with a scrap of cloth, and patting the fuzzy bunny. The text is simple, with sentences of only four and five words.

## Picture Books

When most people think of children's books, it's the picture book that comes to mind. Aimed at nursery school and early elementary school goers, picture books usually contain more words than books for toddlers—the average is 1,000 words, though some are 150 words or fewer. In picture books, the burden of meaning and interest is laid on the illustrations. You may be thinking that this rules out the category for you (as well as books for babies and toddlers), but writers of picture books don't necessarily have to be illustrators as well. While many writers for young children do provide the artwork, publishers will often match up artist with author to provide the visual dimension. However, even if they're not accomplished illustrators, picture book authors do need to think about how their words can be set to drawings and create a story that is complete on its own yet has action and characters that can be illustrated. As they write, these authors need to be picturing their words.



In the case of children's books, the term "anthropomorphic" refers to attributing human characteristics to nonhuman things. Talking animals, cars, and trees would all fall under this category.

Picture books generally have more of a story than books for toddlers. Children who have developed a bit of a vocabulary will enjoy following a character through a simple adventure or event that they can relate to—a birthday party, a mishap (like the one in Mr. McGregor's garden), a day at the beach, or the captivating actions of a bug. While children may not yet be reading the words, they will come to know them as they hear the story and look at the pictures. Then, as they gain skills, they'll be able to master the words and read the book for themselves.

## Picture-Book Requirements

Because they have so few words, picture books (this includes books for toddlers) must incorporate just the right ones. They must be able to tell the story, appeal to and be understood by little listeners, and take children to interesting



places. They also can't be wasted. Like the short story for adults, a picture book needs to get right to it—hook the listener quickly, move steadily through the simple and few-in-number events, then finish up with a satisfying conclusion.

Most picture books are thirty-two pages long and usually don't have more than 100 words on each page. Some picture-book pages have fewer words; sometimes just one or even none. But no matter how many words there are, there must be room for a picture; in fact, some authors feel that there shouldn't be more words on a page than can be comfortably read while the picture is being looked at. To keep the story moving, it helps if each page's words function like a mini-cliffhanger or tease so that readers can't wait to see what happens on the next page.

As to topics, picture-book subjects should be child-oriented and within the realm of the age group's understanding. Everyday doings, stories about animals, fairy tales and fantasy, and stories about families either like or very different from the reader's own are all worthy topics. Picture books can include some drama or conflict—young ones enjoy the grouchiness of an ill-tempered ladybug (Eric Carle's *The Grouchy Ladybug* ) and the bravery of the mischievous monkey who winds up in the hospital (H. A. Rey's *Curious George Goes to the Hospital* )—but remember that some youngsters can be frightened by difficult subject matter, both in words and in pictures. Your goal is to encourage children and support a positive outlook on life, even though it doesn't always work that way. It also doesn't hurt to have a happy ending.

## **A Few Examples**

The following picture books should serve as great inspiration for aspiring children's book writers and, of course, for any little kids that you know.

- *Where the Wild Things Are* (and *In the Night Kitchen*, *The Nutshell Library*, and everything else) by Maurice Sendak
- *Bread and Jam for Frances* (and all the other Frances books) by Russell Hoban and Lillian Hoban
- *Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown
- *The Story about Ping* by Marjorie Flack and Kurt Wiese
- *The Little House* (and *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* ) by Virginia Lee Burton
- *The Runaway Bunny* (and the other books) by Margaret Wise Brown
- *The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper

- *Blueberries for Sal* (and all his other books) by Robert McCloskey
- *Harold and the Purple Crayon* by Crockett Johnson
- *Curious George* (and the other books in the series) by H. A. Rey and Margaret Rey
- *A Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter
- *Alex and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst
- *The Story of Babar* (and the other books in the Babar series) by Jean de Brunhoff

Don't try to write for what's popular. Some books have a two-to three-year gap from completion to publication, so a lot can change from the time you write your book to the time it hits store shelves. Write something you enjoy and it's likely others will too.

## Chapter 5. Books for Children and Young Adults

Do you still remember your favorite books from childhood? Do you still read fairy tales? Do your teenaged kids inspire you to write? Then maybe you should explore writing for children and young adults.

### Easy Readers

Once children start to read, they're eager for books that are similar to those read by grownups, not the picture books they read when they were "little." Easy readers are meant to suit the transition from prereader to reader, and to give growing kids a sense of pride in their new abilities.



The standard for easy readers is sixty-four pages, but some have fewer. An average word count is 1,500, but, again, some go well below that number. And, like in picture books, illustrations are very important.

Though newly sophisticated, beginning readers still enjoy stories that revolve around animals and insects, fairy tales, everyday situations, adventures, and family. With a bit more room, easy readers often contain a slightly more complex story, but it still must be easy to understand and appropriate for the age group.

To make children's reading experiences successful, easy readers tell their stories in short, uncomplicated sentences. That doesn't mean they can't include interesting words or words that are a bit of a stretch, however. These books are no longer the "See Spot. See Spot run" texts of the past, and can be a great way for youngsters to build their vocabulary and have fun with words. What it does mean is that writers must keep an eye on the number of words they string together, so that new readers don't struggle or get frustrated. Like picture books, easy readers need to capture kids' attention from the start, move right through the action, and end on a satisfying note.

### Best of the Easy Readers

Some publishers have series in the easy-reader category—a few of these are

the Dorling Kindersley Readers, the Bank Street Ready-to-Read series, and Simon & Schuster's Ready-to-Read books—but there are several excellent classics to study for their appealing, often humorous stories and their great starts and finishes. Take a look at *Amelia Bedelia and the Baby* by Peggy Parish and Lynn Sweat, *Nate the Great* (part of a series) by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat, *Little Bear* by Else Holmelund Minarik, *Are You My Mother* by P. D. Eastman, *Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss, and *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (and other Frog and Toad adventures) by Arnold Lobel.

## **The Captivating Dr. Seuss**

Theodore Seuss Geisel, otherwise known as Dr. Seuss, was a writer extraordinaire of children's early readers. Geisel was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1904. After graduating from college, he headed to Oxford University in England to seek a doctorate in literature, and then returned to the United States to work for a leading humor magazine called *Judge*. Geisel submitted humorous articles and cartoons to *Judge*, as well as cartoons to *Life*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Liberty*. On a shipboard trip to Europe in the thirties, the rhythm of the ship's engine became the inspiration for his *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*—which was rejected forty-three times before a friend finally published the book. Geisel then went on to produce an Oscar-winning documentary and an Oscar-winning cartoon.

After reading a report that detailed illiteracy among schoolchildren and discovering the fact that many children had trouble learning to read because their books were boring, Geisel's publisher sent him a list of 250 words that he thought were important for first-graders to know. He asked Geisel to use them in a book, which he did—the much-loved *Cat in the Hat*, which contains 220 of the words. Several years later, Geisel accepted a challenge from a fellow author to write a book that used only fifty words. The result was the classic *Green Eggs and Ham*. The beloved “Dr. Seuss” eventually wrote and illustrated scores of books that teach children well with rhyme, rhythm, and fun.

# Chapter Books

Once kids are more comfortable reading, they're ready for the chapter book. Here the story is divided into sections or chapters, like an adult book, and the plot is more developed. Chapter books can run to eighty pages and are usually presented in ten to twelve short chapters. Generally the chapters are brief enough so that a youngster can complete one in a sitting.



In chapter books, subject matter again runs the gamut, but children in elementary school are ready to tackle more emotional and dramatic topics. Relationships between friends, animals, or people in difficult situations; family upsets; humorous exploits—all are fodder for books that children will want to spend time with.

Characters, too, are more developed and three-dimensional in chapter books. A favorite character-driven book of many grade-school kids, and one to study as an excellent example of the type, is *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan. This Newbery Award–winning story focuses on Sarah, a woman from Maine who crosses the country in the late nineteenth century to become the wife of a Midwestern farmer and mother to his two children. As the newly created family gets to know one another, each member confronts the sorrows of loss and the joys and invincibility of love.

In Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, another Newbery Award winner that gets its heart from the main character, an unhappy second grader named Leigh finds that corresponding with an author, and then with himself, helps him through difficult times that many young children can relate to. A second Cleary book, *Ramona, Age 8*, follows Ramona, a boisterous and charmingly annoying girl, as she takes her first school bus ride, deals with a bully, wrangles with her sister Beezus, and runs full-tilt through other familiar childhood situations. Other chapter books to study include *The Bears on Hemlock Mountain* by Alice Dalgliesh and *The Girl with 500 Middle Names* by Margaret Peterson Haddix.

One big difference between early readers and chapter books is that illustrations are no longer as critical. While many chapter books still contain beautiful drawings and paintings that enrich and enliven the pages, grade schoolers no longer need the extensive text reinforcement that pictures provide. Once children are reading fairly easily, the story and its actions become their focus.

## Other Chapter Book Favorites

Two more current authors have written several books that are incredibly popular with older chapter book lovers: J. K. Rowling and Lemony Snicket. For excellent examples of the kinds of stories that sing for children this age, read and study the seven Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

Also enjoy and study *The Bad Beginning*, *The Vile Village*, *The Reptile Room*, *The Wide Window*, *The Miserable Mill*, *The Austere Academy*, *The Hostile Hospital*, *The Carnivorous Carnival*, *The Slippery Slope*, *The Grim Grotto*, *The Penultimate Peril*, *The Ersatz Elevator*, and *The End*, Lemony Snicket's thirteen books chronicling the adventures of the Baudelaire children.

## Books for the Middle Grades

When children reach the upper elementary grades and junior high, they often enjoy books that revolve around more “grownup” concerns, though adventure, mysteries, and animals are still appealing topics. Many children in this age group also enjoy delving into books that take them to other worlds, including works with historical themes and science fiction sagas. Around this time, there's often a growing interest in nonfiction fare. Fact-filled books that provide wide-ranging, compelling information in a readable, nonpreachy style are high on many kids' lists. Colorful illustrations still dot the text, and kids enjoy getting an occasional look at their favorite characters and story settings.



While there's no standard length for middle-grade books, they often run from 96 to 128 pages. A good number of popular works, like the *Harry Potter* series, are much longer, from 200 to 500 pages or more.

One book that middle-grade children have been happily curling up with for some time is C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Fantasy, animal characters, and adventure converge in this classic's pages. Middle graders are transported to the land “beyond the wardrobe,” where magical happenings take place. Other perennial favorites that offer up otherworldly doings are Madeline L'Engle's beautifully crafted *A Wrinkle in Time* and Norton Juster's captivating *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

Judy Blume has written for just about every age group; from picture and storybooks to middle grade, young adult and adult. More than 80 million copies of her books have been sold and her writing awards take up multiple pages. In one of her most popular books, *Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great*, Blume transposed her own fears from childhood (dogs, the dark,



and thunderstorms) onto the main character.

Like the teenagers they will soon become, many middle graders like to read about kids with experiences much like their own. The ups and downs of leaving childhood are a prominent focus for many books aimed at this audience, including issues that relate to school and teachers, family and home life, independence, feelings, and change. Younger children in this category still enjoy the familiarity of stories that feature animals, though the animals may be experiencing very human and very unsettling emotions. Older kids appreciate fast-paced stories filled with action and adventure that speak to their rush to become part of a more grownup world.

## **The Best of Books for Middle Graders**

The following are excellent sources of inspiration for those who want to try their hand at writing books for the middle grades.

- *Stuart Little* (and *Charlotte's Web*) by E. B. White
- *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell
- *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll
- *Harriet the Spy* by Louise Fitzhugh
- *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery
- *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott
- *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett
- *Snail Mail No More* (and *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*) by Paul Danziger
- *The BabySitter's Club* series by Ann M. Martin
- *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery
- *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri

## **Young Adult Books**

When kids reach the end of junior high and enter those never-a-dull-moment teenage years, the fiction that often interests them is very similar in nature to the cross section of novels that is available to adults. Themes that deal with romance (but not explicit sex), values, fantasy, friendship, and family surface often, and

stories can contain complicated situations and evoke strong feelings. High-school interests, including sports, drama, various clubs and hobbies, the outdoors, dances, history, technology, and travel—and friends, friends, friends—are often incorporated in the plot. And, of course, the protagonists are always teenagers.



Because the maturity level of teens can range widely, there are still many books that touch only lightly on difficult issues. Many teen novels concentrate more on wacky behavior and humor.

Joan Bauer's *Hope Was Here* is a good example of the kind of books that appeal to and are read by teenagers. The story chronicles sixteen-year-old Hope, who helps her aunt Addie, the woman who raised her when her mother ran off, to run a diner for a man with leukemia. The plot is filled with situations and issues that are important to many teens as they move uncertainly toward adulthood: romance between Hope and another diner worker and between Addie and the restaurant owner, concern about friends and loved ones, self-image and self-awareness, change, the future, happiness, and plenty of food.

In *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers, sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon faces charges of being the lookout for a man who shot a convenience store owner. Did he do it, or was he just at the wrong place at the wrong time? The unusual recounting incorporates movie script format, journal writing, and text as readers learn about Steve's life before the murder and how he feels as the trial goes on. The compelling look at a troubled time and the teen-oriented language make this a novel many older teens want to read.



When writing for teens, it's particularly helpful for authors to think back to their own high school years. The intensity, growth, and frequent absurdity of the time can be hard for adults to recapture, but spending time around teens can bring those memories back.

On the lighter side, *A Year Down Yonder*, Richard Peck's 2001 Newbery Award winner, chronicles the story of fifteen-year-old Mary Alice as she spends a year living with her very quirky grandmother. The kids at her new school think she's a "rich girl," she's forced to live in a hick town after growing up in Chicago, and her grandmother keeps committing one outrageous act after another. The lively, engaging story is filled with incidents and emotions that today's teens can relate to even though this teen novel is set in 1937.

## Model Works of Teen Fiction



There are many great classics to guide you in writing for young adults. Here are some titles you might find useful:

- *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger
- *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank
- *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton
- *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles
- *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens
- *Emma* by Jane Austen

## Nonfiction

Though children of all ages love to curl up in a parent's lap or a window seat or on the floor of their clothes-strewn room with a great story, many also have a big appetite for information. Even the littlest ones are eager to learn about cars and trucks and cats and dinosaurs, and a lot of other things. Nonfiction books provide hours of pleasure to children as they increase their knowledge and help them search out new worlds to explore.

Writing nonfiction books for children can be an exciting pursuit. Not only is it challenging and satisfying, but it can also be a great way for writers to “break in” without having to handle the complexities of plot, characters, dialogue, and setting they must create from whole cloth when writing fiction. If you enjoy research, expository writing, and introducing readers to a subject that's exciting to you, you may want to try your hand at writing nonfiction.

No matter which age category you're considering, there are a few keys to compelling nonfiction for children:

- The text is straightforward but lively and well paced.
- The subject is one that's suitable to the age group.
- The author teaches but doesn't preach.
- The information is well researched and accurate, and doesn't water down or cover up difficult facts.
- The book doesn't cover too much territory—it focuses on one battle rather than an entire war, or monkeys rather than all jungle animals.
- The subject is one that deeply interests you; you don't have to be an expert already, but you should be interested enough in the topic to immerse

yourself in researching it.

- The text lends itself to photographs or illustrations that provide additional information.

## Choosing Your Subject

Just about any topic can be the basis of an intriguing book of nonfiction. For toddlers just beginning to learn words and numbers, a counting book, a book about colors or letters, or a book that depicts familiar objects and their names should be well received if it offers a fresh, appealing approach. Pictures are very important to these books—there are generally not very many words—but incorporating just the right words in just the right way helps to widen young ones' understanding of their world.



If you're unsure if children will take to your subject, try it out with parents and children you know, talk to preschool and elementary-school teachers, and visit libraries and bookstores to see what children this age are sitting down with.

Nonfiction picture books and easy readers focus on topics as wide ranging as you can imagine. Just about anything goes here: nature, cars and trucks, animals, history, families, places like the zoo, jobs, interests, cooking, getting a new sibling, going to the hospital, or traveling. If you choose something that interests you, and it's within the readers' scope, it's likely that four-to eight-year-olds will enjoy learning all about it.

Preteens and teens are often interested in history, studies of different cultures, biographies and autobiographies of people from many backgrounds and times, scientific exploration, geography and aeronautics, psychology, and physiology. Information that relates to readers' own lives—for example, facts about a famous athlete who competes in a sport they practice, information about their ancestry, or what the times were like the year they were born—is particularly enjoyed.

For first-rate examples of winning nonfiction, check out books by these authors:

- For preschoolers and the early elementary grades: Vicki Cobb
- For the nine-to-twelve set: Jean Fritz
- For young teens: David Macaulay

When in doubt, think about what you enjoyed as a teenager. Dinosaurs?

Mythology? Your family's heritage? The pyramids? Chances are, not much has changed since you were a kid—except perhaps how much we know.

## **Chapter 6. The Screenplay**

Many authors with a good story to tell sometimes choose to tell it not only with words but also with pictures—moving pictures. Writing for the movies can be an exciting way to express your ideas and the ultimate in the fiction writing principle of showing rather than telling.

### **Writing for the Movies**

How do you know if the screenplay is the right format for presenting your story? One way to think about it is to ask yourself if you enjoy writing dialogue. True, you need interesting characters and plot, but dialogue is the most important part, especially if you are writing a movie that you know is unlikely to have a large budget for special effects. Dialogue makes the movie interesting; it moves the action of the screenplay forward and fleshes out the characters. Screenwriters must remember as they write that their script will be seen and heard—and not read—by their audience.

Another point to consider is if your story is very cerebral—if the plot involves characters who do a lot of thinking and a little talking but don't get involved in much action. Every screenplay doesn't need a hold-on-to-your-seat car chase or a battle scene or a baby being born, but it does need some movement and some points of visual interest. The novel might be a better choice for an inner-directed plot, and the short story or the short movie the right pick for an idea with a smaller scope.

One other thing to think about is whether you feel you're a visual person. Novelists, of course, need to describe their scenes and characters to make them come alive in readers' imaginations, but they don't need to structure their story so that it lends itself to visual presentation. Everything about a screenplay is connected to an audience's watching it, so screenwriters must be comfortable with both words and pictures. In essence, the screenplay's form and the way it's written differ completely from a novel's because the screenplay is focused on being made into a movie.

### **Screenplay Versus Novel**

Like the novel, a screenplay is based on theme, characters, plot, setting, and dialogue. It also requires gripping conflict and pacing that doesn't lie down on the job.

*A conflict is made up of a series of crises, straining points in the conflict that cause a realignment of forces or some change in the character. The plot is created by the selection and ordering of these crises. In each scene's internal crisis, an action is taken or not taken, or a decision is made or not made knowingly by the characters.*

—Irwin R. Blacker, screenwriter, teacher, novelist, and television documentary writer

The format of a screenplay is completely different from that of a novel. It is structured in three acts and generally runs between 110 and 120 pages; that's because scripts fewer than 100 pages or over 120 are less likely to be bought and produced due to economic reasons. Shorter films, which run closer to an hour and a half than two hours, are sometimes shunned by moviegoers who think they won't get their money's worth. Longer scripts can require an enormous budget to film, making them less attractive to production studios, no matter how good the story. If you hope to have your script end up being shown at the Cineplex, you'd be well advised to keep it to the feature-length standard of between 100 and 120 pages.



Did you know that one of the reasons most movies run two hours or less is so that they can be shown in theaters many times a day? Long movies can't be shown as often, lowering the theater's revenues.

Another big difference between the novel and the screenplay is that the author provides a line of information at the beginning of each scene. This information, called the slug line, tells the reader about the look, time, and setup of the scene. Lines of description about what's happening in each scene are also provided, making a completed screenplay a blueprint for filming a movie as well as a vehicle for telling a story.

## **In Three Acts**

Most screenplays are built around the framework of three acts. Act I is generally a quarter of the script, Act II is usually half, and Act III is the final quarter. So for a 120-page script, the first thirty or so pages will comprise Act I, the next

sixty Act II, and the last thirty Act III.

The most important part of the screenplay is the beginning—the first ten pages of Act I. They must dazzle. They must immediately grab the reader’s (and later the viewer’s) attention. They must also do a lot of legwork: introduce the main character, establish the story’s setting, let readers know the type of movie they’ll be watching (comedy, thriller, science fiction, western), and get the story going. If you’ve seen the beautifully photographed film *Out of Africa*, you’ll remember that the main character begins the story with the line “I had a farm in Africa,” and viewers immediately see, as the setting shifts from a woman sitting at a writing table to a hunting scene from her youth, that the story will be a remembrance, and from the clothes and the lush scenery and the music and the introduction of a flirting male character that this will be a story of relationships in a distant time and place.



Each page of a screenplay is equal to approximately one minute of screen time. That means a standard-length script of 120 pages will become a movie that’s about two hours long.

Approximately twenty to thirty pages into most scripts, a plot point is introduced. This is an event that occurs within the story that sends its characters off in a new direction. In *Out of Africa*, the female lead, who hasn’t married and is feeling condemned to a small life in the place where she was born, arranges a marriage to a friend, and the two leave their homes in Denmark to start a life together in Africa.

Following the first plot point, Act II turns up the tension. During Act II, the characters confront and deal with many issues and the conflict increases. In *Out of Africa*, the lead characters fall in love, war causes change, a business fails, and the lovers find that they can’t live happily together.

Approximately three-quarters of the way through most scripts, the major issues come to a head in a second plot point—the climax, where another unexpected shift takes place. In *Out of Africa*, after the main characters sadly decide to go their separate ways, the male lead is killed in a plane crash.

For the last quarter of the script, in Act III, the denouement, or resolution, takes place. In these pages, any remaining issues are worked out and wrapped up. In *Out of Africa*, the female lead returns to Denmark and begins to write about her experiences, bringing the story full circle.

## Scene Elements

A screenplay generally contains dozens of separate scenes that are put in a particular order to best tell the story. Each scene is usually short, from a few lines of description and dialogue to four or five pages long, and focuses on a particular incident. One scene should flow smoothly and clearly to the next, and end with the words “CUT TO” (to indicate a jump to the following scene) or “FADE OUT.” Each scene is also marked with a slug line, providing information about the setting and time, and with a few lines of description about what’s occurring in the scene. (To see a sample scene from a screenplay, refer to Appendix A.)

Every scene has a lot of work to do. It should:

- Move the story forward.
- Move the main character closer to or further away from the goal.
- Have a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Be a logical and necessary part of the story.
- Show how the characters involved feel.
- Be compelling—contain either conflict or the foreshadowing of it, or show an unexpected alliance between opponents.
- Keep viewers eager to learn what happens next.

## Scene Sequences

Series of scenes stitched together, called sequences, work as a unit to get across a particular message about action that takes place in one setting. In the Steve McQueen prisoner-of-war movie *The Great Escape*, one sequence toward the end of the movie shows each of the different characters making his way through the escape tunnel. One scene that focuses on one of the men is followed by another and then another. Together, these scenes depict how the mass escape is carried out.

How scenes are sequenced is very important to the finished product. In the classic murder mystery *Witness*, the male lead and the female lead are from completely different backgrounds, the woman an Amish widow and the man a Philadelphia police officer. In a scene where they dance together in her barn, you feel there’s a chance that their growing relationship could develop into something lasting. But in a following scene, where the policeman’s violent side can’t be suppressed, you understand that it’s impossible for him to live with her according to the strong, nonviolent principles that govern her life. If the scenes had been reversed, you would have known too soon that their relationship was

doomed, and given up your interest in it.

Many screenwriters like to establish the sequence of their scenes using three-by-five-inch index cards. On each card they briefly detail what happens in that scene. Then they pin the cards up so that the entire story is laid out in front of them. Using the cards, writers can better visualize character development, see if the action is flowing smoothly and the conflict increasing, and determine whether the story needs ramping up, toning down, or additional exposition. They can also experiment with changing the sequence of scenes to see if different positioning makes for a better story. Some writers use a different color card for the scenes in each act.

Here's an example of what might be detailed on one card:

## **Act I/Scene 2**

- Joan opens the garage door from inside the car, pulls into the garage.
- Gets out, looks worried, starts to unload groceries.
- As the garage door starts coming down, Bob slips under it, unseen.
- Joan turns away from car, is surprised by Bob, screams, drops groceries.
- Bob pulls out flowers from behind his back, grabs Joan in a huge embrace.
- They fall laughing to the floor.

## **Exposition**

Exposition is the telling and the showing of the story. In classical tragedies, exposition was handled through the Greek chorus, a group of onstage performers who acted as commentators on the action. But today, in movies, exposition is carried out in several ways: through dialogue between the characters, through a narrator, through words shown on the screen ("San Francisco, 1936," or a newspaper headline), through music and songs, and through dramatic action (if a sleazy-looking guy is walking slowly along the edge of a playground full of children, we know something bad is about to happen). The best kind of exposition isn't accomplished by factual statements but by subtly yet dramatically integrated details.



"In Hollywood, the story gets you in the door. The first question a producer asks is not whom the movie's about but what it's about. A compelling story gets you into the room, strong characters keep you there. Without a strong story to guide them, your characters, though they may be fully developed, will wander aimlessly around until the producer yawns and thanks you for your time."

—Christopher Keane, novelist and screenwriter



It is most often characters who tell us who they are and what's going on. But they don't generally just turn to the camera and stop the flow of the action (although some comedies do use—sparingly—the technique of a character speaking directly to the audience). Characters perform exposition by giving us information through their interactions with their environment and other characters. For example, a woman might have a dialogue-free scene in which she forwards the plot by carefully putting on makeup in front of a mirror and then casually tucking a pistol into her purse. Or a frustrated woman might argue with a child, revealing deep-seated anger for her mother. Or a man might have a best friend with whom he has a drink every Friday after work, someone who's known him for a long time and draws out every juicy bit about his life. Good character-driven exposition tells us everything we need to know in bite-sized pieces, and with a delicate hand instead of a hammer's blow.

## Learning the Lingo

If you are interesting in taking up screenwriting, make sure you are familiar with the following terms:

- **Back-story:** Information about a character's past that helps viewers to better understand the story.
- **Crisis:** A point in the plot when two or more forces confront each other.
- **Denouement:** The period that follows the climax, when any remaining issues are resolved.
- **Exposition:** The parts of a script that show what happened previously and identify the characters and the time and place of the action. Exposition shouldn't be spelled out by the characters, rather it should be an invisible part of the story.
- **Log line:** A compelling one-or two-line description of a screenplay that sells your idea.
- **Master scene:** All the action and dialogue that occurs within one setting at a particular time, preceded by a **slug line** (see below).
- **MacGuffin:** An object that moves a story forward: For example, a clue, such as Cinderella's glass slipper, or something desperately wanted by a character, such as the Ark of the Covenant in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.
- **Plot point:** A particular occurrence within a script when something happens to change the direction of the story.
- **Scene:** One event in a screenplay, with a beginning, a middle, and an end;

a scene often contains a crisis or confrontation and always advances the story.

- **Shot description:** A description of the action in a scene. For example: “Trina, twenty-five, dressed in nurse’s scrubs, enters the hospital corridor briskly, headed for her patient’s room.” This information follows the **slug line** (see below) and is given in lowercase letters.
- **Slug line:** Identifies the time and location of a scene. Follow these guidelines:
  - INT. (interior) and EXT. (exterior) indicate whether the scene is taking place inside or outside.
  - Provide the scene’s location: BARN, BEACH, or LIVING ROOM, for example.
  - Indicate the time of NIGHT or DAY.
  - You may want to suggest the type of camera shot—CLOSE, MEDIUM, FULL, or LONG—to film the scene, although the director has the final word on these kinds of decisions.
  - A slug line for one scene might read INT. LIVING ROOM—NIGHT. The slug line information is always given in capital letters.
- **Storyboard:** Sketches of a script’s scenes that the director uses to plan the making of the film.
- **Synopsis:** A brief summary of a script, generally only a few paragraphs long.
- **Treatment:** A breakdown of a story that describes it in just a few pages (ten to twenty is standard). Often a producer who is considering a script will ask to have a treatment written to sell him or her on the story.
- **V.O.:** Stands for voice-over and entails commentary by a character or narrator that is heard from off screen or that is set up as a character’s thoughts.

## **Chapter 7. Blogging**

You've probably heard the term "blog" but may not be clear on what it means, why you might want one, or how to create one. To start, the word "blog" is short for "weblog," an online version of a journal. While it is possible to make blogs private, the general idea behind blogging is to share your thoughts with readers (also known as "visitors" to your blog).

### **What to Write**

If you're new to blogging, you may want to start with simple text entries. These might include a review of the book you just finished, commentary on the movie you saw last night, or a funny account of surviving your three-year-old's birthday party.

### **Consider Your Readers**

Because your blog may not have many readers yet, you may want to start by writing about things of interest to your friends and family. After all, other than people who stumble onto your blog by accident or through a search engine (perhaps looking for a certain topic), the main visitors to your blog will be those to whom you've sent your blog address.

### **Keep it Simple**

Once you master the art of adding text content, you can play around with the buttons (and read the hosting blog software's "help" section), to discover how to add photographs, videos, music and even links to other websites and blogs.

Eventually, you may discover that your blog is an easy way to share photos of your kids (or grandkids), vacations, new puppy, birthday parties, and the like. It's much more affordable than printing and mailing photos or videos, and you can include lengthy written commentary.



web development knowledge, you can make frequent updates. In fact, many people update their blogs daily or even multiple times each day.

## Creating Your Blog

There are many options for creating a blog, and most are completely free if you're willing to have the name of the host in your link's address. For example, if you choose to create a blog on Wordpress.com, your link would be *http://YOURBLOG.Wordpress.com* (Replace "YOURBLOG" with the name of your blog.) Some of the most popular hosts that offer free blogs include:

- Wordpress.com
- Blogger.com
- LiveJournal.com
- MySpace.com

## Blogging in a Community

There are also sites that offer free blogging for those with similar interests, localities, or professions. Here are a few of the more popular group blogging sites that you might want to consider:

- **themomblogs.com** : This site is broken down into even more specific categories, such as Scrapbooking, Pregnancy, Disabilities, Single Moms, and Spiritual.
- **blogher.com** : Bills itself as "the leading participatory news, entertainment and information network for women online." More than 51,000 members had listed 22,000+ blogs as of May 2009.
- **Christianblog.com** : A family-oriented site with Christian bloggers from all over the globe. The network content is filtered by both software and humans.
- **sportsblognet.com** : This blogging network uses Wordpress.com's hosting to bring together fans of all types of sports.
- **Ning.com** : This platform allows users to join or create social networks based on common interests. According to BusinessInsider.com, there are about 1 million Ning.com social networks already in existence. A keyword search for social networks using the word "write" turns up 1,720 results.

Blogging in a community often increases your chances of someone stumbling upon your blog, as visitors can usually search for sites by keywords and topics.

## Free versus Paid Hosting

While most new bloggers are likely to practice using a free blog hosting service, other fee-based options are available. But why would anyone pay for a blog ?

- **Simplified web address:** Some people choose to pay so they can use whatever online address they like. Whereas a free blog on Blogger.com would be <http://www.blogger.com/blog/YOURBLOG>, a paid blog might allow you to simply use [www.YOURBLOG.com](http://www.YOURBLOG.com).
- **Storage space:** Most free blog hosts limit the amount of space posters are allotted, but many offer the option of paying for additional space if needed.
- **Ad control:** More experienced bloggers may choose to pay for a blog in order to allow for “monetizing.” In short, this means that your blog can earn you income each time someone clicks on an advertisement on your site. Because some of the free hosting sites don’t allow bloggers to use clickable ads, those bloggers experienced in monetizing know they can probably make enough to cover their monthly hosting fees on other sites. In addition, some free sites reserve the right to display advertising on your blog. These could include annoying pop-up ads, and even promotions for adult-content sites.
- **Portability:** When you pay for blog hosting, you retain the ability to move the content of your blog to another hosting site later. With free hosting, you generally would need to start your blog from scratch if you decided to later move to another host.
- **Customization:** While most free blogs offer standard templates, a paid blog allows you to customize the look and functions of your pages.

## Bells and Whistles

Most blogging programs will allow you to select widgets, either for free or at a small cost. Widgets are essentially on-screen tools that allow you to add “bells and whistles” with little effort, thanks to prewritten code. Some of the most common widgets you’ll see on a basic, free blog site include:

- **A counter** : Displays visitor traffic on your blog
- **A search box** : Enables visitors to search your blog for keywords and phrases
- **A list of categories** : Allows visitors to view posts related to certain topics of interest
- **A list of keywords** : Allows visitors to view all posts tagged with certain keywords
- **A list of links** : Allows you to share direct links to your favorite websites and blogs (often called a “blogroll”)
- **A “Contact Us” form** : Allows visitors to contact you without revealing your e-mail address
- **Related posts**: Automatically generated at the end of a post, these help visitors find posts on other blogs that relate to the topic
- **Recent comments** : Displays most recent comments posted by visitors to *any* topic on your blog
- **Recent posts** : Lists the blogger’s most recent posts (not the visitors’ comments)
- **Top commentators** : Displays screen names of the people who comment on your blog the most

Netvibes Ecosystem, which boasts “the largest widget directory,” offers more than 175,000 widgets. In the beginning, though, your best bet is to practice using the most basic widgets that are offered with your blogging template before moving on to more complicated options.



Once you post your entry, you will be part of the “blogosphere,” the collective community of online blogs. Be careful what you say. Just because you don’t give out your blog address doesn’t mean someone can’t stumble onto it...and tell your boss or grandmother!

If you master the basic components of your blog, you may find it tempting to add lots of fancy widgets. Be careful not to spend too much time designing, as it can take away from your writing time (and energy) and make it more difficult to keep your blog looking fresh to returning visitors.

## Maintaining Your Blog

You may start off with a bang as you begin blogging, only to quickly feel like you’ve run out of things to say. That’s okay! Maintaining a blog doesn’t mean you have to post regularly and, when you do post, you can write as much or as

little as you want.



According to an April 2009 report by emarketer.com, 27.9 percent of U.S. Internet users have a blog they update at least once per month.

It's not uncommon for new bloggers to write on a variety of topics. More experienced bloggers, however, often create niche blogs that focus on a more narrowed subject, such as nature, technology, pets, or books. Some bloggers even manage to regularly maintain multiple blogs.

## **Developing Interaction**

One of the easiest ways to keep your blog fresh is with interaction from visitors. To get them involved, try posting open-ended questions, a call for favorite quotes (or lines from movies, or songs from the '80s) or flash fiction opening line prompts for which writers can post their (very) short stories. Just be sure to put a word count cap on submissions or you'll likely get visitors posting entire chapters from their latest novel.

## **Hosting Guest Bloggers**

Guest blogging is also a popular method for attracting new visitors, not to mention filling content on your site to give you break. This is often done days—or weeks—in advance so the hosting blogger has time to review and approve content.

There are countless sources for blog content. All you have to do is find someone with an interesting product or service to promote. For writing-focused blogs, good choices might be ghostwriters, book editors, or writing contest sponsors/judges. Authors are usually happy to supply content for guest blogging, as it gives them the opportunity to promote their book(s) and drive traffic to their own blog or website with links. This is often referred to as a “blog tour,” a sort of virtual book tour for authors. Best of all, guest bloggers will often promote their appearance in advance on their own website or blog, which will help drive traffic to your site.



If you decide to approach an author for content, look for someone with a relatively new book. They are not only eager to promote their work, but will often have prewritten content, such as a Q&A about their book, available to send to bloggers.

If you choose to use a guest blogger's prewritten content, be sure to let them know when it will be posted. This will allow them to plan in advance, so that they might be able to answer any questions posted by your visitors.

## **Policing Your Blog**

There are safeguards you can use to ensure your blog stays free of spam, inappropriate content, or general abuse.

Your first line of defense is to use a web form to allow visitors to contact you, rather than listing your e-mail address on the site. Some spammers use software to scan blogs for e-mail addresses, which they then use to send junk e-mail or to register on other websites using your e-mail address.

Another popular program called CAPTCHA (Completely Automated Public Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart) protects blogs against automatically generated material (such as spam) by generating a test that only human can pass. The most common test includes a series of distorted text (such as random letters and numbers), that a poster must type into a box correctly before their content will be sent to the blogger. CAPTCHA is free and also available in audio form for visually impaired posters.

Most blogging software also allows you to choose the option of reviewing all comments before they are posted on your blog. This gives you the opportunity to delete comments before other visitors see them.

## **Promoting Your Blog**

Driving web traffic to your blog is a much sought-after goal, but today's bloggers have far more options than even a year ago.

Social media sites like Twitter.com, Facebook.com, and MySpace.com allow bloggers to alert friends, family, and other followers to recent blog posts, and to provide direct links to them.

## **Search Engine Directories**

There are also countless search engine directories that allow you to add your blog's link free-of-charge. These directories help potential visitors learn about your site based on your blog's content. There are also service providers that will submit your blog's link to hundreds, if not thousands, of search engine



directories for a nominal fee.

## Using Your Byline

If you write for publication, your byline can serve as a tool to promote your blog. This is especially effective for work that is published on the web, as most online sites will make the link to your blog “live.” A live link means that a reader can click on your blog address in your byline and be taken directly to your site. It’s much more efficient than requiring the reader to manually type your blog address into the browser bar.

Some companies use blogs to promote a product, service, or brand. The entries may be written by a company employee or by a paid freelance blogger. This is often referred to as “corporate blogging.”

While you’re getting used to the word “blogging,” you might as well learn some of the associated terminology. Here are some of the more common blog-related words and phrases you’ll hear:

- **RSS** : Short for “Really Simple Syndication” and “Rich Site Summary,” an RSS allows blog visitors to receive alerts when a favorite blog is updated.
- **Podcast** : Essentially an online radio show, these audio recordings can be listened to on a computer or downloaded onto an MP3 player.
- **Flickr** : An online photo storage site.
- **Ping** : (Packet Internet Grouper) A notification to a blogger that their blog is being referenced on another blog. Sometimes called a “trackback,” pings are displayed in the comments section of a blog.
- **Dashboard** : The screen hosting a blog’s controls and tools.
- **Technorati** : The leading blog search engine that indexes posts from around the blogosphere in real time.
- **Search engine** : A program (such as Google) used to retrieve information from indexed documents, blogs, websites and networked systems.
- **Guestbook** : An online ledger in which visitors to your blog can indicate that they’ve stopped by.
- **SEO** : Stands for Search Engine Optimization and refers to the process of improving your search engine ranking.
- **Page rank** : A measurement of where a blog or website shows up in the search engines.

Until you feel comfortable with blogging, don't worry about how many visitors you have or how fancy your site looks. Just get in the habit of writing, and perhaps you'll even realize you've got the beginning of some publishable work!

## **Interview with Platform Expert and Author Christina Katz**

Christina Katz is the author of *Get Known Before the Book Deal: Use Your Personal Strengths to Grow an Author Platform* and *Writer Mama: How to Raise a Writing Career Alongside Your Kids* (both Writer's Digest Books). She started her platform "for fun" seven years ago and ended up on "Good Morning America." Christina teaches e-courses on platform development and writing nonfiction for publication. A popular speaker at writing conferences, writing programs, libraries, and bookstores, she hosts the Northwest Author Series in Wilsonville, Oregon.

### **Q: Why do you think blogging has become so popular?**

**A:** Blogging levels the publishing playing field. Blogging means anyone with regular access to the Internet can fire up a free blog and start getting their words out to the world. This universal allure is not going to go anywhere anytime soon. Like-minds are connecting with like-minds around the world thanks to the tool that is blogging.

...

### **Q: What should a new blogger be writing about on a blog?**

**A:** The fact that anybody and everybody can blog means there is a lot more static than clear signal out there, so beginning writers/bloggers are challenged to write well and understand what makes them stand out in a crowd of bloggers writing on similar topics. If you don't have a focus and a thrust to drive your blog upward in visibility, then your blog is going to be something only a handful of your friends read. If that's what you're after, or if you want to use your blog as an online journal, then this may be all you need. But if you are using a blog to become more visible, known, and influential, then you need to treat blogging as you would any marketing tool.

...

### **Q: How does blogging help a writer in the long term?**

**A:** When a writer blogs consistently over time, blogging becomes a very potent marketing and social networking tool. If you think of your writing career as a gradual upward trajectory, then a blog is an important part of ramping up your personal media platform. I think any writer who makes a commitment to using their blog to broadcast their ideas, messages, and success in the long run will discover from personal experience how they can maximize their visibility and reach slowly and steadily over the course of a career.

Look at authors like Cory Doctorow (<http://craphound.com>) or Heather Armstrong (<http://dooce.com>), who are both incredibly successful at leveraging career success through basic blogs. And yet, being authentic, helpful and transparent are such important parts of blogging that a writer does not want to try and imitate other, already-successful, bloggers. Just commit to growing your blogging platform alongside your writing career in a way that is integrated and authentic for you and you will amplify your success.

...

**Q: What things should a new blogger NOT post?**

**A:** There are no set rules about what you should and should not post on your blog. However, you should remember that the Internet is a giant copy machine so if you are posting material on the Internet, it's no longer "yours," it's "ours." If you have this awareness you won't make a decision that will disappoint you later. I'd say writers have two choices today: either decide to create in private or decide to create in a public forum. I think it's important to make an informed decision and not just do what everyone else is doing. What's going to work better for you, the writer? If you are creating in private, at what point will it make sense to start sharing your work and how? If you decide to make your blog public, how are you going to set up the forum to be most productive for you to meet your deadlines? We are living in transitional times in the publishing industry, so there are no black and white answers. Making the most of your strengths and addressing your weaknesses is a timeless strategy. Decide what you want to share with zero strings attached, and that's what goes in your blog.

...

**Q: What's the best way to attract readers and keep them coming back?**

**A:** At this time, blogs are so varied in topic and form that there is no perfect formula. However, I'd say that there are certain constants in blogging:

1. Consider your audience, their likes and dislikes, and the best ways to reach them.
2. Think of your blog as an ongoing dialogue with your audience and keep the conversation relevant and lively.
3. Hand over the microphone. Invite others into the spotlight and let them lead or join the conversation.
4. Remember that blogging is essentially a social tool (a way to connect with others) and a networking tool (a way to reach out and meet new people).
5. Think of your blog as your audiences' water cooler (don't inundate, over-promote, or become a rantoholic) and you'll keep them coming back.

## Chapter 8. Functional Nonfiction

Do you need creative-writing skills to write a travel piece, a press release, or other kinds of functional writing pieces? Of course you do. To capture readers' interest, works of nonfiction also require a creative, imaginative touch—in fact, they're really just another way to tell a story.

### Dispelling the Fiction

Just like fiction, good nonfiction is original and innovative. Nonfiction genres—essays, political or people columns, how-to books, travel articles, memoirs, humor pieces, literary criticism, biographies and autobiographies, and business documents—are exciting vehicles for creative expression. (For information on writing nonfiction for children, see Chapter 5.)

Many authors come to nonfiction writing because of an interest in a particular subject, such as travel, a recent election, or a piece of family history. The topic so interests them that they want to learn everything they can about it, and then share what they know with others. But not everyone who picks up the newspaper or scans the travel book table at the bookstore is immediately interested in an unknown writer's trip to Santorini or in learning about a stranger's take on local politics. So nonfiction writers have two important jobs: to inform and enlighten, and to write so compellingly, so creatively, and with such a fresh approach that they capture the attention of readers who might not otherwise keep reading.



In choosing a nonfiction topic, be sure it's something that grabs your attention as well as a subject you think will appeal to readers. Nonfiction works can teach, delight, connect with, and entertain readers, but exciting nonfiction needs the author's personal and passionate commitment.

Because they function as teachers, commentators, and reporters, nonfiction writers must be accurate and base their stories on fact. Research, then, is key to this type of writing. Nonfiction research can involve hours at the library or on the Internet, reading through old family letters or scrapbooks, interviewing experts, studying business or legal documents, tracking down relatives, or testing directions for building a chair. In the case of a memoir or an autobiography, it can even involve self-research. Writers who enjoy uncovering information rather

than dreaming it up may find one of the nonfiction formats right to their taste.

Those who enjoy expressing their opinions may also be drawn to nonfiction writing. News reporters, of course, must present the facts just as they happen. But other nonfiction writers have the luxury of also saying what they think about the facts. Columnists, biographers, memoirists, and movie critics can present the truth funneled through their own take on life. Nonfiction writers often develop a distinctive voice that draws readers not only to what that they say but to how they say it—think of humorists Dave Barry and Garrison Keillor, E. B. White in his essays and anecdotes, *Angela's Ashes* author Frank McCourt, and National Public Radio's personal essayist Marion Winik (see her essay of advice in Chapter 9).

To sum it up, writing nonfiction may be for you if you:

- Enjoy research, learning, and discovery.
- Are avidly interested in a particular topic.
- Are a good observer and listener.
- Have strong opinions you want to express.
- Have an exciting, fact-based story to tell.
- Enjoy writing from information rather than imagination.
- Can present facts dramatically and descriptively.
- Can be both objective and subjective in your writing.
- Have the desire to share experiences and knowledge with others.

Remember, the process of writing a functional piece can be just as creative as writing a poem, a short story, or a screenplay. All forms of writing give your creative muscles a good workout and add to your knowledge, skills, and growth.

While there are many, many forms of nonfiction writing, the following pages will provide information on several popular and important areas like letters to the editor, press releases, travel pieces, and other forms of functional writing.

No matter what genre you choose to work with, keep in mind the following techniques for creating exciting nonfiction.

- **Personify:** Treat inanimate objects as though they were alive.
- **Dramatize:** Surround your subject with action and interest.
- **Compare:** Use similes and metaphors (see Chapter 15).
- **Make it relevant:** Connect with the reader's experience.
- **Intrigue:** Pose a question at the start and then answer it later on.
- **Unleash emotion:** Write with passion and from the heart.

- **Include unusual information:** Surprise or astonish with the truth.
- **Reveal your bias:** Let readers know your unique point of view.
- **Teach, don't preach:** Stay off that high horse.

Use dialogue and description to present facts dramatically. Just like fiction writers who use these devices to show readers their imagined characters and world, nonfiction authors can incorporate intriguing conversation and vivid depictions to enliven their factual accounts.

## **Functional Forms: Personal, Analytical, and Promotional Writing**

Many nonfiction forms, in addition to providing information, serve a specific purpose. These include, among others, responding, thanking, analyzing, arguing, expressing an opinion, influencing, or promoting. You come across many of these writing forms in your daily life. For example, you read ads that try to influence you to buy a certain product or take a particular action. And you write thank-you notes (or at least your mother told you to) when someone does you a favor, gives you a gift, or provides a service. Functional forms of writing include everything from letters to the editor to complaint letters, book reviews and other types of reviews or criticism, opinion pieces, campaign speeches, and advertising and marketing materials—all excellent vehicles for expressing your creativity.

### **Letter to the Editor**

With most types of personal, analytical, and promotional writing, the aim is to convince the reader to accept your opinion or message. Sometimes you also try to get the reader to take action like, for example, taking a stand against a government policy. Writing to persuade or put forward your opinion on a topic that's important to you can be exciting and involving, and can also be an excellent way to break into print. Many authors have begun or boosted their writing careers by having a letter to the editor or a review published and noticed—longtime *New Yorker* movie critic Pauline Kael began her career by reviewing movies for free. Some authors have also gone on to develop their letters and opinions into much longer articles or even books. While you won't be paid for writing a letter to the editor or an unsolicited movie review, if your piece catches

an editor's eye and gets published, you'll have a clipping to accompany your next for-pay article proposal.



If a local or global issue is important to you, writing a letter to the editor of your hometown newspaper or a larger, national paper can be a great way to share your ideas with others. If your letter is printed, you may persuade thousands of readers to join your cause.

The best letters to the editor are written in a clear, strong voice. The letter focuses on one specific issue and relates all information to that point. Letters to the editor can include both facts and opinions. For example, you can quote statistics on teen-related car accidents while you state your opinion that the minimum driving age should be raised. You can also outline action that the reader can take if he or she supports your idea. For example, you could urge readers to write their state representatives and senators to advocate raising the driving age in your state.

Some letter writers like to reveal that they have a connection to the issue to add clout or to provide readers with their particular perspective. A person writing about raising the minimum driving age might explain that her friend's car was struck by a truck driven by a teen driver and point out the difficult aftereffects that the writer witnessed firsthand. Or a writer with a strong opinion about the state of local schools might add credence to his claims by letting readers know that he's a teacher. But writers who simply want to let others know their opinion and not their bias can write powerful, compelling letters as well.

Here are some important points to keep in mind when you write a letter to the editor:

- Choose a topic that you feel passionate about.
- Remember your audience—include details and opinions that will interest others.
- Use a strong, clear voice and vivid, descriptive language to assert your idea.
- Express your opinion in a reasoned, nonconfrontational way.
- If you use quotes, be sure to include your sources.
- Urge readers to support your idea or take action on its behalf.
- Edit your letter carefully for typos, spelling, and grammar.

After you write your letter, test it with a friend or colleague. Ask for suggestions that might make the letter clearer or more powerful. After you make any revisions and mail your letter off, watch the letters page to see if it's printed, then keep watching to see if another writer responds to your letter. You might



strike up a challenging correspondence, and that might give you the opportunity to write another letter.



When writing a letter to the editor, keep it brief. Generally, editors won't publish a long letter even if it's very good. Most letters that are published are less than 250 words.

Writing a letter to the editor isn't like writing a short story; you don't need to build up to a climax in the middle. On the contrary, because readers often just skim the first paragraph or so, your first sentence is the most important. Everything else in your letter should support the opening sentence.

In your supporting paragraphs, be sure to use specific examples, not generalizations. For example, instead of saying "Nobody can afford to go out to eat anymore," say, "I've seen three restaurants in my neighborhood go out of business this month alone."

Be careful not to get too personal, especially when writing a letter that criticizes someone's actions (or inaction). It's okay to complain that the county hasn't fixed the potholes, but don't call the Commissioner a lazy good-for-nothing such-and-such.

## **The Press Release**

Many fields of business, from high tech to retail to real estate, need the skills of the creative writer to promote and publicize their goods and services. Advertising campaigns, marketing communications, and public relations events all are important ways in which organizations catch the public's eye. From TV and newspaper ads to campaign buttons, press releases and brochures, creative copy can influence what people buy, wear, and do.

One promotional tool that is often used by businesses is the press release. This information source lets newspaper editors and others know that a new product has just become available, an important conference is going to be held, or a significant event has taken place. Press releases help to promote awareness and put the business being touted in a positive light, increasing the chances that the public will buy its wares.

## **Get the Reader's Attention**

Writing a press release that doesn't get tossed in the trash takes skill,

thought, and, most importantly, creativity. Your release most likely will have competition from a number of others to grab an editor's eye and his or her available print (or airwave) space. So your news should be truly newsworthy, and so interesting and inviting that an editor will use it as the basis for an article or review.



Did you know that many famous creative writers and artists worked in advertising or public relations at one point in their careers? These include Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Dorothy Parker, Cornelia Otis Skinner, and writer and comedian Bob Newhart.

In promotional writing, as in other types of nonfiction writing, the first sentence carries the burden of getting the attention of the reader. For example, to grab the spotlight for one of its new lines from among all the computers that are out there, Apple crafted a press release that began, “In a move that makes the world’s fastest personal computers faster, Apple today unveiled an all-new Power Mac G4 line. . . .” The fastest computer made faster is definitely something worth reading about.

## **Provide Information Quickly and Economically**

Once you’ve got the editor’s eye, you want to provide all the essential information quickly in what some editors call the inverted pyramid: the who, what, where, when, and why of the release at the top and the less critical information farther down. This approach can be effective if the editor reads only part of your piece, or needs to cut information to make an article fit the available space.

In your release, make every word count. Provide information, but use your word-crafting skills to evoke images that make the reader see the product or event. Great press releases use strong visual language. In copywriter and novelist Annalisa McMorrow’s press releases, she uses powerful description to invite readers to learn more about a fashion-oriented line of note cards and prints. McMorrow intrigues and entices by revealing that the cards depict “a wayward ankle strap [that] falls daintily open; a stiletto heel [that] prepares for the next forward stride.”

## **Find an Interesting Tie-In**

Eye-catching press releases also take a fresh approach. A new laundry

detergent or the opening of another nail salon may not be exciting to an editor or the public on its own, but when put in an intriguing light, either can be the perfect basis for an engaging story. In his *Careers for Writers*, Robert Bly writes about a young publicist who was looking for a great hook to promote an acupuncturist. The man discovered that it had been ten years since former president Nixon had made his groundbreaking trip to China. His lead, and his story, put a new slant on what could have been just another report on a small business. His release, which was widely picked up, stated, “Ten Years After Nixon’s Visit to China, Acupuncture Comes of Age.”



To catch editors’ eyes, press releases need to be fresh and inventive. But to do their job they also have to be accurate. Always double-check all the pertinent information: times and dates, street addresses, phone numbers, website addresses, and the spelling of people’s names and places.

## Keep in Mind

Here are some pointers to remember when writing a first-rate press release:

- Use visual and sensory language to create images and mood.
- Watch out for clichés.
- Put the most important information at the beginning.
- Find a fresh approach.
- Write to the audience who will be reading your release.
- Be sure all the facts are correct and current.
- Make the release irresistible with an exciting title and a grabber of a lead.

## The Travel Piece

If one of your passions is experiencing up close and personal the many wonders the world has to offer, it won’t take you a New York minute to decide that travel writing is where you can shine. Recounting a travel adventure can be an exciting way to let loose your creativity while connecting with others who share your continuing urge to get up and go. It can also be a great way to explore personal or global issues that are important to you, meet people with different backgrounds and interests, and experience other cultures.

While many travel articles provide the lowdown on exotic destinations, a good number of travel writers choose less expensive and more accessible spots to focus on. Travel pieces can detail not just the makings of dream vacations for

those with the means to cruise the Caribbean or be whisked straight to Paris in a first-class seat. They also share information about more down-to-earth—and still immensely appealing—attractions, making it possible for travel writers of all resources, interests, and hometowns to find intriguing locations to write about.

Destination articles are written for travelers who are considering a trip to a certain locale and are interested in obtaining tips and advice from someone who has already been there. Many such articles concentrate on frequently visited tourist destinations and offer a fresh outlook, detail an overlooked but intriguing spot, or cover the latest restaurants or attractions. Rather than a simple recitation of the facts, service articles should stir up readers' interest and encourage them to say, "Now, that's a place I want to visit."

## **Doing the Research**

Because the information in this kind of article is intended to help readers with their travel plans, it's essential that all the details be correct and current. That means research, and often a lot of it. Depending on the breadth of the piece, you may need to provide the skinny on getting there, where to stay, where to eat, where to shop, how to get around, what the weather will be like, motels that will accept canine travelers—the works. This can be done through a variety of sources.

## **Before You Go**

Before you head out the door, you can request brochures or information from appropriate tourist or travel organizations (including the nearest embassy or consulate if you're writing about a foreign country); review cultural, geographic, historic, and other material available at the library; and speak to friends or colleagues who recently visited your chosen travel destination.



Look at road maps and atlases and browse through the newspaper archives for general background information. The Internet, of course, is a huge source of facts and photos. You may also want to consult travel guides for their ideas on must-see sites and places to stay.

If you know in advance what the focus of your article will be, you can also obtain information from target sources. If you're going to be writing an article on traveling in England with a baby, you may want to talk to a pediatrician, check out current equipment that's available for tot toting, and talk with new

parents who have recently been brave enough to travel *en famille*. If you have a contract to write a piece for a particular magazine or newspaper, you'll want to look for information that will help you focus your piece to their audience. If you're writing an article on traveling with a baby in England for an upscale magazine, you may want to query English four-star hotels to see which provide babysitters, infant strollers, and massages for mom and dad.

## While You're There

Visiting your destination of choice is, of course, an exciting part of writing a travel article. But once on location you'll have work to do. In addition to experiencing the place, you'll need to search out the *whys* and *wherefores* of what makes it an excellent spot for travelers to visit.

Good note taking is essential. You'll want to write down details about everything you see: not only scenery and structures but also sounds, smells, colors, how the light falls, the mood, the feel of the place. Remember, your job as a travel writer is to not only provide the facts but to provide them vividly and in a compelling way. Descriptive, sensory language will add much to the appeal of your piece.



Many chambers of commerce, tourism bureaus, or visitors' centers will gladly e-mail writers high-quality photos in hopes of free publicity. Ask the tour guide, museum director, or hotel manager if they can recommend a good resource for you to obtain photos.

In addition to taking notes, you'll also want to collect brochures, fact sheets, bus schedules, event flyers, or museum admission information—anything that will add to your knowledge base. It's also a good idea to talk to people in the area in order to gain their perspective, tips, and advice. If you think you'll quote residents or experts in your article, be sure to get the correct spelling of their names.

## Structuring Your Article

Adventurers turn to destination articles for the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *how* of being in a particular part of the world. That means you need to provide those essentials within the description and story of the piece. You also need a great “hook” to interest readers in the first place, and a closing that reinforces the central idea.

The best travel pieces start with a lead that captures the reader's attention and sets in motion what the article will be about. Kathryn Brockman's story in the *San Jose Mercury News* that compares spending time in a Kenyan game reserve with a "safari lite" stay at the Animal Kingdom Lodge in Orlando, Florida, begins, "A cloud of dust trailed our mini-van as we hurtled over large stones, then dropped into potholes on our journey into the heart of Kenya's national parks." In seconds, we're right there in Kenya with Brockman, and we want to know more about her trip. Another tantalizing beginning, from an article by Larry Bleiberg in the *Dallas Morning News*, teases, "Every day, a tiny outpost of England comes to a handful of U.S. airports." What will that be? We need to read on to find out. (If you're wondering, it's the better-than-U.S.-airline food, service, and amenities the author enjoys by traveling on British and other foreign flights.)



Things change. Museums switch to off-season hours. Restaurants go belly up. Hotel rates rise. If an article you write is published several months after you wrote it, you will need to verify the facts or include a disclaimer that the information was correct as of the time of the writing.

Sometimes leads just naturally spring to mind, but other times they'll show themselves once you've begun writing. However you find your lead, your following paragraphs should all relate to it, and your closing should circle back to it.

In between the lead and the conclusion, you'll need to transmit the information the reader is looking for:

- Location: Where in the world the point of interest lies (this should happen in the first few paragraphs).
- Season: The time of year the article refers to.
- Reason: Why the reader should go there.
- Author: Who the writer is and his or her viewpoint (someone on a trip with an alumni group, a first-time traveler to the Far East, etc.).
- Useful facts and tips: Trains or planes to take, relative costs, don't-miss sights, problems encountered—everything you feel will help a fellow traveler get the most out of a trip to that spot.

Some facts are best presented in a bulleted list—for example, how and when readers can access each of the ten best places to picnic in the area—but the majority of travel articles are presented in the form of a narrative. Anecdotes showcasing high points or unusual aspects of a trip will also give readers a good feel for the writer's experience and what they might come up against or enjoy if

they make the trip. Captivating, can't-put-'em-down travel articles interweave facts, description, quotes, dialogue, and anecdotes told through the writer's unique perspective.



Although it's not critical for travel writers to be good photographers, it certainly helps. Offering to provide photos along with your article not only increases your chances of getting published, ("Great! Now we don't need to fly a photographer to India!") but it also can increase the amount of money you get paid.

## Try It Yourself

A convenient—and inexpensive—way to try out travel writing is to focus on places close to home. Putting a fresh face on a familiar location or discovering something unusual about seemingly ordinary locale can intrigue a newspaper editor as well as your neighbors. Parks, historic buildings, private homes, and new restaurants or attractions can all be the center of appealing travel pieces. Pretend you're a visitor to your area and take a close look around. What's the history behind the sculpture in the center of town? Does the café that draws a crowd every summer evening serve an unusual dish? Are the beautiful homes you see ever open to the public? Do the research and write the article.

## Chapter 9. Literary Nonfiction

Memoirs and literary criticisms represent the literary side of nonfiction writing. These works tend to be more self-conscious than reader-directed, and demonstrate a higher level of concern for the literary aspects of writing.

### The Memoir

Derived from the French word *mémoire*, meaning “memory,” the classic memoir is the recollection of a particularly vivid and important time in the author’s life. The earliest memoirs date back to the fourth century, when writers described the intense religious and psychological experiences they underwent. More recent memoirs have offered up remembrances of the full range of situations that affect the human condition, and the most current tend to expose deeply personal and often painful times.

What makes authors want to share their private thoughts and experiences? It seems that this kind of storytelling could be embarrassing or shameful since it allows complete strangers to read about intimate details and perhaps difficult or even sordid situations that the writer was part of. Restaurant critic and gourmet extraordinaire Ruth Reichl says she was very worried what people would think after she published her collection of memoirs called *Comfort Me with Apples*, which details a love affair, the demise of her first marriage, the lowdown about cooking luminaries she worked with, the death of her father, and her romance with the man who became her second husband. Other authors, too, have found it hard to expose their lives to scrutiny and have been fearful of hurting people whom they mention in their work. Revisiting painful times can also be traumatic.

Is a memoir an autobiography?



QUESTION

In a sense it is, because it details part of the author’s history. But an autobiography is the whole story, the author’s whole history. It generally covers everything from one’s birth and childhood to the present time and is written toward the end of one’s life.

But many memoirists say they thoroughly enjoy—and gain a great deal from—writing about their past. They relive pleasurable moments. They rediscover someone or something that was once an important part of their life. By writing a memoir, they are able to confront lingering issues. They can connect with other people and share common experiences. They can better



understand their own life and what drives others. They can move ahead by looking back. And they can discover they don't need to be living an extraordinary life to have something important to say.

The memoir focuses on a selected time of particular meaning and impact. Memoirs can be written by authors looking far into their past, but many memoirists are young and recount significant recent events. The memoir can be a fertile field for writers of every age and background, and a powerful way to write about important memories without taking on the sometimes overwhelming task of writing an autobiography.

## **Try to Remember**

Because memoirs are personal histories, they need to be honest to honor the real-life people depicted in the story and to make those people real and believable. They also need to be honest because they deal with facts.

If you're wondering how you're ever going to remember the details of something that happened years ago, try these ideas for bringing it all back:

- Interview (in person or by phone, e-mail, or snail mail) someone who would be familiar with the situation or at least the time period you are writing about: a family member, friend, neighbor, colleague, teacher, coach, or activity leader.
- Search through old files and records, including photos, home movies, letters or postcards, diaries, even bills or bank statements from the time.
- Look up important documents such as marriage or birth certificates, grant deeds, or car purchase papers.
- Spend time at the library checking up on relevant historical, geographical, and cultural information. Try books, magazines, newspapers (newspaper offices also contain files of back issues), audio-and videotapes, and online sources.
- If it's possible, revisit the "scene of the crime." If you can't, try to visit a similar place. For example, if your memoir centers on an incident during college, visit a nearby college to bring back the feeling of being a student.
- Sit quietly and try to visualize the time. What did you like to wear? Who were your friends? What did your home look like? What was going on in your life? In the world? Write everything down or speak into a tape recorder.

## Stitching It Together

Because a memoir is actually a story, it also needs to be structured and developed like a novel or a short story. Often writers feel their memoir will just take shape as they write it, but a memoir needs to be built with a sense of order to link and sequence the many memories involved. Memoirs should also be seeded with information about the particular time to give the story context.



Memories are imperfect. Readers of your memoir may recall things differently, but remember that your memoir is your story as you best remember it. If you're honest in your recollections, you'll preserve an important time with your personal truth.

Writer, editor, and teacher William Zinsser says that good memoirs are “a careful act of construction.” To tell their story well, they skillfully and clearly weave together three key elements: summary, exposition, and drama.

### Summary

Summary information gives readers the background of the story and gets it started. Sometimes this is done with just a sentence or two of introduction. In other memoirs, several paragraphs detail the time, place, and circumstances of the memory. Characters are also introduced as part of this information.

E. B. White, in his essay “Afternoon of an American Boy,” gets right into his story with a straightforward summary of when and where it takes place and who it will be about:

*When I was in my teens, I lived in Mount Vernon, in the same block with J. Parnell Thomas, who grew up to become chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. I lived on the corner of Summit and East Sidney, at No. 101 Summit Avenue, and Parnell lived four or five doors north of us. . . .*

*The thing that made Parnell a special man in my eyes in those days was not his handsome appearance and friendly manner but his sister. Her name was Eileen. She was my age and she was a quiet, nice-looking girl. . . .*

### Exposition

Exposition is story development. Through exposition, you learn everything

you need to know in order to understand the particular point or the moment that's going to be the focus. There's no set length for this memoir element, and often it alternates with drama (see below) throughout the story to provide additional information or to analyze something that just happened. Exposition takes places through narrative and dialogue and can include cultural, geographic, historical, personal, and other kinds of information.

In "Afternoon of an American Boy," White takes the reader through his relationship with Parnell and his sister, as well as his confession that he both admired girls and was terrified of them at the time. White's relationship with his own sister is also important to the coming crisis of the story:

*My bashfulness and backwardness annoyed my older sister very much, and at about the period of which I am writing she began making strong efforts to stir me up. She was convinced that I was in a rut, socially, and she found me a drag in her own social life, which was brisk. She kept trying to throw me with girls, but I always bounced.*

## **Drama**

Here is where the story reaches a significant moment, and the description and action slow down to concentrate on it. Sometimes characters will speak to add reality to the situation and to add punch to the narration.

In "Afternoon of an American Boy," White moves on to the main event once he has provided the background:

*One day, through a set of circumstances I have forgotten, my sister managed to work me into an afternoon engagement she had with some others in New York. . . . My sister had heard tales of tea-dancing at the Plaza Hotel. She and a girl friend of hers and another fellow and myself went there to give it a try. . . . Incredible as it seems to me now, I formed the idea of asking Parnell's sister Eileen to accompany me to a tea dance at the Plaza. . . . The fact that I didn't know how to dance must have been a powerful deterrent, but not powerful enough to stop me.*

Following his decision to ask Eileen to a dance, the young White makes his move, and, miraculously, Eileen accepts. But it's a disaster. The grown author remembers the horror of trying to adapt his "violent sister-and-brother wrestling act into something graceful and appropriate." Years later, he analyzes the event through an imaginary conversation with Parnell in his later role as the chairman

of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. White confesses not to being a Communist Party member or a member of the Screenwriters Guild, but to taking Parnell's sister to a tea dance when he knew he couldn't dance.

## Evaluating Your Work

Once you have your story down, you'll probably want to let it sit for a while and then, refreshed, take a close look at it. You may even want to read it aloud, to yourself or to someone whose opinion you respect, to see if the words let you conjure up a picture and to get a sense of the flow. Try to determine if everything hangs together—if the descriptions and dialogue travel smoothly from one point to the next. Also check if all your remembrances are necessary for the main point. Sometimes a piece of information that is meaningful to you will establish itself in your memoir but really shouldn't be there, either because it isn't relevant or because it doesn't move the story forward. Check that you've provided enough context so that people who aren't familiar with the circumstances can still understand the story. (For more on evaluating your writing, see Chapter 16.)

See how your work compares to some of the most memorable memoirs written to date. Included is a list of some favorites.

- *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau
- *The Road from Coorain* by Jill Ker Conway
- *The Year of the People* by Eugene McCarthy
- *In My Father's House* by Nancy Huddleston Packard
- *The Boys of Summer* by Roger Kahn
- *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood* by Mary McCarthy
- *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain
- *Memoirs* by Pablo Neruda
- *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard
- *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt

## Literary Criticism

Literature, in all its forms, gives readers great pleasure. But it also extends a challenge: to think about the themes, issues, and relationships on which it is based. As you read, not only are you told a story, but you're given information, opinions, and thoughts about the big questions of life.

*Although . . . in ordinary usage ‘criticism’ implies finding fault . . . in fact most literary criticism is . . . chiefly concerned with interpretation . . . and with analysis. . . . A critic can see excellences as well as faults. Because we turn to criticism with the hope that the critic has seen something we have missed, the most valuable criticism is not that which shakes its finger at faults but that which calls our attention to interesting things going on in the work of art.*  
—Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature*

While many readers consider the issues that literature brings up by discussing them or thinking them through, some readers like to contemplate them by writing a critical or analytical work. This work can focus on a particular book, essay, or article, or an issue that relates to a written piece. For example, a critical essay might discuss how a particular work reflects the time in which it was written, its meaning in current society, its implications for the future, what it says about the author, or what it says about relationships. Works of criticism are generally arguments that seek to answer important questions using facts and persuasive reasoning. They can also include the author’s personal experiences with the issues. Literary criticism can be especially creative because the author brings a unique viewpoint and interpretation to the topic.



Hailed by many as the greatest playwright of all time, William Shakespeare is the most widely read author in English-speaking countries. His plays are among the most studied, analyzed, and critiqued of all literary work.

## **Find a Worthy Subject**

With this form of writing, it’s vital to choose a subject that deeply moves or concerns you. Sometimes an author will be interested in a particular topic long before he or she begins to write about it, and will have years of information and experience to bring to the argument. For example, literary critic Ocean Howell first became interested in urban issues because he experienced the power relationships involved in urban spaces through his years as a serious skateboarder. Over the years, he learned about and developed ideas about public spaces that he brings to his theories and arguments.

## **Read Up on Your Subject**

In addition to being passionate about a subject, a critic also needs to enjoy

research and critical reading. You'll want to view what you read as a kind of puzzle. For example, if you decide to analyze a piece by William Faulkner to see what he has to say about the post–Civil War breakdown of traditional Southern values, you may want to study several interwoven issues—including race relations of the time, Faulkner's background, and the history of the area in which Faulkner grew up—to see how they affected his philosophy and his writing. Literary criticism often involves making connections and drawing conclusions through context.

## **The Literary Analysis**

To analyze a literary work, here are some general steps to follow:

- Choose a thought-provoking topic that is particularly meaningful to you and that you think will interest readers.
- Read widely on the subject.
- Choose the work you're going to analyze.
- Read it several times, trying to understand the ideas the author put forward.
- Write down key points and phrases. Identify important relationships.
- Summarize your theme and develop your key points and theories.
- Outline your essay.
- Write a first draft.
- Keep thinking about your topic, and make changes as you develop new ideas or arguments.
- Revise and edit until your position is clear and well supported.

To summarize, try asking questions. For example, what's behind a particular character's need for respect and position? Work until you feel you have enough information and a compelling argument.

If you're ready to try your hand at literary analysis, start with an author who writes about things you already know well. Even if your piece never gets published, you'll enjoy the process—both reading and writing—along the way.

## **Words of Advice on Writing**

Marion Winik is a personal essayist and commentator whose work airs regularly

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*Wherever I go, whatever I do, there is just one thing people want to know from me, one question that always comes up no matter what the context: How did I get on "All Things Considered?"*

*The story begins in December 1990, when my friend Liz Lambert looked up from reading one of my essays in the Austin Chronicle, our town's alternative weekly. "Mare," she said in her West Texas way, "you should read these thangs of yers on NPR."*

*"Yeah, Liz," I said, "and you should be President of the United States."*

*But not two weeks later, I got a postcard from NPR correspondent John Burnett, who had also been reading me in the Chronicle. Later we would become elementary-school parents together, but at the time our kids were in diapers and we'd never met. He asked if I'd like to come over and record a couple of the essays, and offered to take the tape to Washington and see what people thought.*

*I called him immediately, but not fast enough: His wife said he'd been sent to Iraq to cover Operation Desert Storm. Oh, great. Now the only thing between me and my big break was Saddam Hussein.*

*John finally came home and recorded me in late spring of '91. I taped a piece about dealing with the Texas summer, and another about raising a child in a Jewish-Catholic intermarriage. Luckily my demo arrived during an early May heat wave in Washington and it went straight on the air.*

*That was ten years ago, and not long after that, I heard from a literary agent who wanted to help me publish a book of my essays. That was four books ago. So there are two morals of this story. One is: Liz for President! The other is, the*

*whole thing started with me publishing essays for almost no pay in a local alternative newspaper. This is why I always tell people who are wondering how they can begin getting published to aim low—think small—go local. I spent years sending essays to major national magazines and saw them come back in my SASEs like clockwork. To get started, I had to look for a lower foothold.*

*There is always somebody who is interested in your work. At first, it may be your family members, compadres in a writing group, the audience at an open-mike reading. Well, fine. Take any audience you can get and work from there. Get it out there, get feedback, and maybe someday you'll also get a check. But if you start by looking for the big check, you may never find anything at all.*



## **Chapter 10. Poetry**

Many believe that poetry is the essence of language, and that all other forms of communication and expression are based on it. But what exactly is poetry? Is it a Shakespearean sonnet of iambic pentameter, Ogden Nash's light verse, or a Mother Goose nursery rhyme?

### **Defining Poetry**

Poetry obviously includes structured poems, light verse, and nursery rhymes, but also much, much more. In fact, one of the most wonderful things about poetry is that it encompasses so many forms. Though many poems follow a traditional structure, experimentation and new forms are not only possible, but also encouraged. Just about any group of words that tells a story and is put together in lines can be considered a poem. As poet William Carlos Williams said, "[Y]ou can make a poem out of anything. You don't have to have conventionally poetic material."

Children's poetry is poetry, too. To write poems for children, think back and remember what it was like to be a child. You need to see the world the way a child does. As in all writing for children, observe what they like to do, how they react to situations, what pleases them, and what they fear. Try to remember your own childhood and what was important to you. Use words suitable to the age group and remember that young children generally love the fun and surprise of rhyme.

### **The Basics**

Though poetry is a diverse and liberating genre, powerful and moving poetry is much more than just a group of words in lines. It is a celebration of language, a work of sounds, images, color, rhythm, and emotion that expresses a deeply felt experience or idea with the poet's unique voice and in words that he or she shapes to personal dictates. According to William Carlos Williams, "Anything that is felt, and that is felt deeply . . . is material for art. . . . It's what you do with it that counts."

While poetry is a completely personal expression, with varying forms and no required structure, it may help you in your writing to understand some of the traditional elements.

## Line and Meter

Almost all of poetry is written in lines. A line can be a complete sentence on one line, but it can also be a complete sentence broken down into several, shorter lines. In longer poems, lines are often combined into stanzas—two or more lines that work like a paragraph in a piece of prose. Each line is usually made up of between two and five feet, or rhythmical units, and each foot contains accented or unaccented syllables.



The pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in a line is called the poem's meter. All the lines in a poem can follow the same meter or each can be different.

Frances Mayes, poet, creative writing teacher, and author of *Bella Tuscany*, believes that the two most useful meters in English are iambic pentameter and iambic tetrameter. A line of iambic pentameter contains five feet of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. An example can be found in C. Day Lewis's line: "the FLAGS,/the ROUND/aBOUTS,/the GA/la DAY."

Iambic tetrameter contains four feet of the same, illustrated in Lewis Carroll's line: "The SUN/was SHIN/ing ON/the SEA."

There are several other kinds of feet, however:

- *Trochaic* is a highly emphatic form, with an accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable.
- *Dactylic* has one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables.
- *Anapestic* has two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable.
- *Spondaic* has an accent on every syllable.

## Rhyme

When most people think of rhyme in a poem, they think of end rhyme, in which a word at the end of a line rhymes with a word at the end of another line. But there are many kinds of rhyme. True rhyme, or perfect rhyme, is a rhyme in which the last stressed vowel sound and everything following in the rhyming

words are identical, for example, *shining* and *whining*. An internal rhyme is a rhyme in which the rhyming sounds are within the lines of a poem, rather than at the ends. For example: The sun shone *high* its brilliant *eye* . An off rhyme, also known as near rhyme or slant rhyme, is not a true rhyme, but words in which the final consonant sounds are alike and the words echo each other, for example, *cough* and *huff*.



Many modern poems are lyric poems. A lyric poem was originally written to be sung accompanied by a lyre—the English word *lyrics* , the term for the words to a song, comes from this form.

There are also rhymes in which vowels are different and consonants are the same or echo, and rhymes that have similar vowel sounds but their consonants are different. Alliteration can also be thought of as rhyme (head rhyme), since it repeats sounds, usually in the form of consonants at the beginning of words or syllables, such as *she/shell/shed*. Rhyme can add a pleasurable, musical quality to poetry—much of poetry is written to be spoken aloud or sung—but not all poets use rhyme in their work.

## Genres

There are three major types of poetry: descriptive or dramatic, narrative, and lyric. A descriptive poem focuses on details that depict a scene, a sound, a person, or a feeling in a very immediate way. Often a character will speak lines to dramatize the telling. A narrative poem, such as Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride,” tells a story or part of one. A lyric poem, often written in the first person, is any poem that expresses personal feelings and thoughts.

## Forms

While poetry can take any form that pleases the poet’s eyes and ears, many poems fall into one of the metered measures mentioned previously. However, others follow a form all their own. Here are some recognized formats:

- **Blank verse:** Unrhymed lines of consistent length and meter, often in iambic pentameter.
- **Concrete poetry:** Also called shaped poetry, in which the typography and layout of the words contribute to the poem’s meaning; for example, a poem

about a bird in flight might have the words placed on the page so that they are in the shape of a bird.

- **Haiku:** A centuries-old, extremely brief Japanese verse form that evokes a mood and often refers to a season or nature; haikus consist of seventeen syllables in three lines—five syllables in the first and third lines, and seven in the second.
- **Epic:** A long narrative poem about a cultural hero.
- **Found poetry:** A sequence of words not originally intended as poetry; found poetry is generally extracted from prose because it contains rhythms or sounds or images that can be expressed as poetry.
- **Limerick:** A five-line poem in which lines one, two, and five rhyme and lines three and four rhyme; most are meant to be humorous. “There Once Was a Man from Nantucket . . .” is a well-known limerick.
- **Prose poem:** A short, often intense piece of writing that is generally structured like a paragraph of prose but uses such poetic devices as repetition and meter.
- **Free verse:** A poem with no pattern of rhyme or line length.
- **Sonnet:** Fourteen lines of iambic pentameter incorporating a rhyme pattern.

## Words and Images

Engaging poems are composed of language that is fresh, colorful, sensory, emotional, and meaningful. The words come from the author’s understanding and perception and create a mood or feeling that conveys his or her thoughts. That means that the words of a poem must be chosen carefully to produce the image the poet intends. The poet must also arrange the words in a way that both pleases his or her sensibility and provides meaning to the reader or listener.

*“Let’s say I want to write a poem in which I describe what it’s like when my husband is out of the house and I’m roaming around the apartment without him, enjoying myself. I can sit here and describe that to you in a conversation. But to take something very natural and reconstruct it in a poem, and maybe find a rhyme in it, and words that connect below the surface, and still have it come out sounding as natural as the experience, almost as natural as [a] conversation—there’s the struggle.”*

*—Deborah Garrison, poet*

While clarity is important, poets often choose particular words for their sound or tone or because they hint at a meaning rather than place it directly in the reader's lap. They also use words to surprise, to entice, or to suit the subject matter or the mood they're working to convey. A poem about a visit to your late grandmother's home might use Victorian language and a stately rhythm. One about street life might include colorful, vibrant words and mix bursts of speed with a slower pace.



Flowery, excessive language isn't always necessary to convey beautiful or compelling images. A poem is usually stronger if it is more sparsely worded and includes only those words that best express the writer's message.

To enrich their poems' meaning, poets often construct word images. These can convey a visual impression, or one of sound, smell, taste, or feel. Images can provide the way for a reader to experience what the author experienced or evoke a mood that deepens the reader's understanding of the poem. When creating images, poets write from their emotions and feelings and focus on the details that will best illustrate what they wish to express.

## Figures of Speech and Figurative Language

When creating images to deepen the reader's understanding of a thought or an idea, poets often use figures of speech and other figurative language. A line in a William Blake poem deepens the reader's understanding by using a simile: "The moon like a flower . . . ." Another line in the same poem provides additional insight by using personification when discussing the moon "With silent delight / Sits and smiles on the night."

Similes, metaphors, and personification enable poets to make what author Frances Mayes calls "figurative images," which surprise, expand the reader's understanding, draw attention to the message, increase reading pleasure, and add dimensions by making associations that wouldn't immediately have come to mind. By creating such images, poets establish a new medium of exchange between the writer and the reader.

When crafting an image, the poet, in the words of poet Florence Trefethen, details "something in the external world that the senses can apprehend that is the equivalent of an intangible mood or feeling." To do this, there are a variety of image-makers to work with:

- **Alliteration:** The repetition of consonants, particularly at the beginning of

words. For example, the letter *s* is alliterated in the following line: “He summoned the sweetness of silence.”

- **Allusion:** A reference to or the mention of something from history, the arts, nature, current society, and so on that the reader has knowledge of and that will help the reader better understand the poet’s meaning. For example, “like Juliet she waited” is an allusion to a character from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.
- **Metaphor:** A direct comparison between two things. For example, “my mind is a clock ticking down the day.”
- **Onomatopoeia:** Using words that imitate sounds. For example, *arf* sounds like a dog barking, and *boom* sounds like an explosion.
- **Personification:** Giving human qualities to inanimate objects. For example, “the sun sprang orange into the lifting haze.”
- **Simile:** An indirect comparison of one thing to another using the words *like* or *as*. For example, “his voice roiled like a storming sea, pulling me beneath it.”

For more on figures of speech and other rhetorical devices, see Chapter 15.

## Putting Words on the Page

That blank page or screen can be intimidating. How do you get started? What are you going to write about? Poet Wallace Stevens said that poetry emerges from a “transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet.” But how do you begin that transaction?

### The Idea

Keep an image journal. Write down bits of conversation you hear, advertising copy, lines from letters or books or plays, words you come across in the dictionary, quotes, cartoons, recipe ingredients—any words that carry particular meaning or emotion for you. You may also want to make drawings. These can be of images from dreams or something you observe, or drawings that illustrate words or convey a particular mood or feeling you experience. Then, when you sit down to write, you’ll have a treasure trove of idea starters, and perhaps some of those just-right words you’re looking for.

Some writers have the germ of an idea, something that resulted from an

observation or a particular event or a memory, a dream, or an emotion. Others begin by choosing a form. Still others have a complete line or a sequence of words in their head that sets them writing. Whatever brings you to the page (see Chapter 11 for more on getting ideas), concentrate on it and go with it.

Write down everything you can think of that relates or that comes to mind, even if it doesn't seem particularly good or useful or expressive. You may get bits and pieces that you like and ideas for revising at the same time. Put it all down. Think about specific words. Take inspiration from other poets or your favorite stories. Let your subject guide you as you look for evocative language and the right rhythm. Remember that your words should convey not just your message but also the feeling behind them. Try not to censor yourself—write freely and honestly. This is *your* poem.



One of America's best-known poets, e.e. cummings, was famous for his lack of form and punctuation. He was especially fond of lowercase letters, reserving capitalization for "special occasions."

## **Revise, Revise, Revise**

When you've gotten a good deal down, start to revise. (You may want to let the first draft sit for a bit before you do, to approach it fresh.) As you revise, keep in mind the feeling or circumstance that triggered the poem in the first place. Look for clichés or overly flowery or excessive language. Check that your figures of speech not only make sense but also truly express your feelings. Does the poem still interest you? Do you still feel deeply about the subject? Would a different format, a prose poem or free verse for instance, suit the poem better? Are the words vivid and layered but not obscure? Reading the poem aloud will help you hear the rhythm and the flow and point out where further revision is needed.

Robert Pinsky, the thirty-ninth Poet Laureate of the United States, believes that poetry is a vocal art. "If a poem is written well," he says, "it was written with the poet's voice and for a voice. Reading a poem silently instead of saying a poem is like the difference between staring at sheet music and actually humming or playing the music on an instrument."

## **Name Your Poem**

If you haven't named your poem yet, think about doing it now. This can be

surprisingly hard. Since it's the first thing readers see or hear, it can make them curious or make them shrug. Some titles directly state what the poem is about—like Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter." Others give more of a sense or feeling than an explicit statement—like Robert Frost's "Design" or William Bronk's "Where It Ends." Still others name someone or something that the poem addresses—for example, Denise Levertov's "To the Snake." Titles can also be taken from the first line of the poem, and some poems go unnamed. If you feel that a strong title will enrich your poem, create one that relates to the poem in some way, either through words or images, or pick one that would intrigue your audience.

## **The Last Two Steps**

Read your poem aloud again and have others read do so as well. Listen to the musical quality as you read—does the poem "sing" for you? Do the words move at the pace and with the tone you had in mind? Does a word stop you? Is the poem stronger in some parts than others? Ask someone who enjoys poetry and will treat your work seriously and respectfully to read the poem, too. You needn't revise based on his or her criticism, but another opinion or interpretation will add to your understanding of the work you created.

## **Poetry Pointers**

Here are some poetry pointers that should get you ready to write:

- Write about something that is very important to you.
- Aim for a fresh, new approach. Even if your subject has been the focus of many poems, you can infuse it with interest by being original.
- Experiment with form, line length, and punctuation—you have "poetic license" to break the rules.
- Construct images that appeal to the senses as well as convey meaning.
- Watch out for clichés and too much sentimentality.
- Revise and revise and revise until you have just the right words in just the right order.
- Read your poems aloud—you'll hear the music or the remaining problems.

With the exception of a few people each century, no one makes a living as a



poet. The good news is, you're now free to write poems without the burden of getting them "right" for an editor. And because poetry has less grammatical and format restrictions than any other form, you can simply enjoy the process without any pressure.



"In a poem the words should be as pleasing to the ear as the meaning is to the mind."

—Marianne Moore, poet

## Interview with Sage Cohen

Sage Cohen is the author of *Writing the Life Poetic: An Invitation to Read and Write Poetry* (Writer's Digest Books, March 2009) and the poetry collection *Like the Heart, the World*. She writes three monthly columns about the craft and business of writing and serves as poetry editor for *VoiceCatcher*. Curator of a reading series at Barnes & Noble, Sage teaches the online class Poetry for the People. She has won first prize in the Ghost Road Press poetry contest and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Learn more at [sagesaidso.com](http://sagesaidso.com) and [writingthelifepoetic.com](http://writingthelifepoetic.com).

### **Q: How do you think writing poetry helps people?**

**A:** I think poetry fills the gap left by the so-called objective truth that dominates our media, science, and legislation. Many of us want to comprehend and communicate the complexity of human experience on a deeper, more soulful level. Poetry gives us a shared language that is more subtle, more human, and—at its best—more universally "true" than we are capable of achieving with just the facts.

The practice of poetry teaches us to pay attention. It invites us to observe, feel into and consider our lives—and our world. This benefits us and it benefits our writing because we don't just see things as they are—we see them as we are.

Poetry can help us give voice to feelings and ideas that feel too risky and complicated to speak out loud.

There is a kind of alchemy in writing through such vulnerabilities...by welcoming them in language, we can transform the energies of fear, pain, and loneliness into a kind of friendly camaraderie with ourselves. In effect, we can write ourselves into the confidence that we have what it takes to make sense of and survive the challenges that life inevitably presents us with.

My invitation to you: The next time you feel discomfort, poetry can help you find someplace to go with it. Next time you feel the itch, let poetry help you

scratch it. Next time you experience impatience, you can transform it into interest through the lens of a poem. Next time you feel anger, you can dig deeper and find the awe underneath. This is the gift of poetry. You can write yourself where you need to go.

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**Q: How can the practice of poetry improve our relationship with language?**

**A:** Poetry attunes us to the vast possibilities of language. We learn to discern whether to choose the word wait, abide, or endure to reflect the right shade of meaning, the best rhythm and sound . . . .

We learn how to listen to light and that loneliness has a taste. We learn that to name things right is its own kind of ecstasy. And when we hit the sweet spot—finding just the right word or phrase or metaphor or image—we gain a foothold into the trust that such discoveries are available to us when we practice tuning in.

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**Q: What makes a poem a poem?**

**A:** Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart proclaimed in 1964, “I can’t define pornography, but I know it when I see it.” Many people feel the same way about poetry. It is difficult to summarize what makes a poem a poem, and what the experience of writing poetry might be. Poetry means something different to all of us, and our relationship with it as writers and readers is personal and individual.

And yet, in some ways a poem is like a meal. There are a finite set of “ingredients” that may go into a meal (vegetables, grains, meats, cheeses, spices, etc.) and an infinite number of ways that those ingredients might be combined. Likewise, there is a basic set of ingredients that go into the making of a poem. And just as we know that a shoe does not belong in our chicken soup, there are certain parameters that distinguish poetry from other literary forms. Let’s take a look at the most common ingredients we’ll find in the poetry pot, and explore how they can be used to create some very diverse feasts.

- **Compression**— the art of conveying much with few words—is one of poetry’s signatures. Whereas a novel has hundreds of pages to convey the arc of its narrative, a poem typically has anywhere from a few lines to a few pages to do so. Meaning and feeling are distilled into a language where

every word has weight, and therefore must be both precise and alive.

- **Lines and stanzas** are one of the easiest ways to distinguish poems from prose. In prose, the sentence is the basic unit of language. In a poem, the line is the basic unit defining the momentum of a narrative. (The prose poem is an exception to this rule.) Where and how a poet breaks a line and groups lines into stanzas influences the speed and rhythm with which the reader takes in the poem.

- In poetry, language does double-duty as both **music** and **content**. The rhythms and sounds that words make can have as great an influence on the reader's experience of a poem as the literal meaning (if any) that is conveyed. Some poems employ the strict meter and rhyme patterns that certain forms demand. More common today is the free verse poem in which the poet has an unlimited range of possibilities in expressing music through words. Some poems use language entirely as a musical instrument, without offering any clear narrative at all.

- Whereas prose uses words to literally say what it means, poetry often speaks its truths less directly. Poems use **imagery** to convey our world and our lives in surprising new ways. Rather than tell us what is happening, a poem may simply show us. Through simile and metaphor, poems line up seemingly unlike things and help us see them anew. This gives the reader an opportunity to come to his or her own conclusions.

Because poetry is such an expansive medium with far more possibilities than rules, there will always be poems that contradict the generalities proposed above. As you write poems and read the poetry of others, I recommend that you keep your own list of qualities defining what makes a poem. In the short term, this will help you become more conscious of what you're doing and why. Over time, you'll imprint these fundamentals into your being so that the shaping of a poem is something that simply becomes a part of you.

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**Q: What are some misconceptions about poetry?**

**A:** These are the three that I'm most passionate about debunking:

**Fiction:** You have to be deeply miserable or dysfunctional to write great poetry.

**Fact:** What is true about unhappiness is that it gets our attention. Poems happen in the space of paying attention. So it's not that we require pain to write poems. It's just that this may be a natural starting place for some of us. In reality, there are a wide variety of ways to engage in the poetry of our lives.

**Fiction:** You have to be an “expert” to write poetry.

**Fact:** No one needs an advanced degree in creative writing or a fancy pedigree to enjoy writing poems. What most people need is simply a proper initiation to help them tune into the world around them through a poetic lens. (This initiation can happen through reading a book, taking a workshop or simply reading poems they love.) Once this way of perceiving is awakened, anything is possible!

**Fiction:** Your life is not interesting enough to write poems.

**Fact:** Even the lives that appear ordinary on the surface are replete with unnamed wildernesses waiting to be discovered. Poets are not larger-than-life beings who have extraordinary, magical experiences (and powers) completely unlike any you will ever encounter; they’re driving their kids to soccer practice and taking out the garbage on Thursday nights like the rest of us. All that poetry asks of us is that we discover something new in our familiar lives and circumstances.

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**Q: What advice would you give someone who was interested in writing poetry, but wasn’t sure how to start?**

**A:** I believe that every one of us has a swarm of poems flitting around our heads at this very moment, waiting to land. They’re trying to figure out how to penetrate our I-don’t-know-how force field. A really useful place to start a poem is with freewriting—because freewriting dives under our thinking into the ideas streaming below where we’re stuck or judging or lacking in confidence. It taps us right into the source of what is alive in us.

Put your pen to paper and keep it moving for ten minutes without stopping. Then put your notebook away without looking at it.

The next day, pick up your freewriting and underline every word or phrase that looks interesting or surprising to you. Choose one, and write that down as your first line. Maybe you want to also include a few other phrases from your freewriting too...

Let the poem unfold from there and be willing to go where the language takes you.

## Chapter 11. Getting Ideas

Every piece of writing begins with the generation of an exciting idea—it's what sends you racing to your desk and sets your fingers racing across the keyboard. So what is your idea going to be? What story will you tell?

### Ideas Are Everywhere

Story ideas are everywhere, but you need to find one that truly interests you and that's worth writing about. If you don't already have an idea that you want to run with, this section provides numerous ways to help you uncover a compelling idea that you can shape into an engaging story. And guess what? Coming up with that idea is probably not as hard as you think. And guess what else? The best ideas are often the simplest.



Ideas can be found in memories, observations, experiences, encounters, conversations, activities, sensory details, moods and emotions, books and other media, objects, scenery, relationships, weather, fantasy, history—just about anything.

There is no right or wrong way to look for an idea. Different authors use different methods, some spontaneous, some very methodical. There are probably as many approaches as there are creative writers. There are also many, many sources. Be open to everything. Don't disregard anything. You'll discover what works best for you by trying lots of approaches and investigating many different possibilities. And you'll probably discover that you come up with so many good ideas that you have dozens to choose from, and dozens to store away for future projects.

### Where to Look

Some authors will tell you: "Write about what you know." Others say: "Write about what you don't know" because sticking to what you know can be limiting and keeps you from learning. Whether you choose to search for your work's foundation in familiar terrain or decide to walk on unknown ground, there are plenty of sources that can stimulate your imagination and start you on the road to

that great idea.

## **Notebook or Image Journal**

Chapter 1 talked about the need to keep a notebook or journal within reach at all times to record thoughts, ideas, words or phrases, bits of conversation, impressions, illustrations, feelings, dreams, colors, inspirations—anything that strikes you as interesting or important as you go about your day. So, of course, you’ve been jotting things down for a while now, and have pages of ideas and starting points to work from, right? I’m pretty sure you just answered yes, but if you didn’t, never fear. You can start keeping a journal or notebook now. As you read, work, converse, relax, study, eat, and write, stay open to possible story starters. Fill your notebook with anything that seems noteworthy. As you add to your stash, you may want to say exactly what about the entry seems important to you and where you were and what you were doing when you noticed or thought about it.

## **The Media**

Magazines, newspapers, radio, TV, letters to the editor, and movies—these sources are gifts. Other writers are out there providing you with all sorts of material that you can use to inspire ideas.

As you already know, reading extensively can teach you a great deal about writing as you get an increased feel for structure, dialogue, character, and plot. It can also give you the seeds for stories, which you then develop according to your own imagination. So read widely. Don’t just look at the front page of the paper for dramatic ideas. Look at the business section—the stock market could be an exciting focus to wrap a story around. Look at what the different columnists have to say—a humorous piece could remind you of a crazy situation you experienced, which could be the starting point for a collection of anecdotes. Read the editorial page, the travel section, and even the comics. The sports page, the pets page, *every* page is a possible treasure trove of great ideas. Ditto for magazines, TV and radio shows, plays, improvisational games, and movies. A photograph, a quote, a piece of dialogue, a funny phrase, a character’s mannerism or an emotion he’s experiencing, an announcer’s accent, a sound, or a color could click with your imagination and turn magically into a story idea.

## Artistic Sources

Artistic sources include photographs, family albums, home movies, book and magazine illustrations, sculpture, and paintings. Pictures can inspire well more than a thousand words. Often looking at something beautiful or unusual or colorful or even frightening or ugly can result in another picture or idea appearing in your mind. Again, as with media sources, be open to everything: colors, textures, moods, emotions, memories, associations, settings, and sensations.



Be careful not to let your creative resources get pushed to the wayside due to work, chores, errands, parenting, etc. In her book, *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron encourages writers to take themselves on "Artist Dates" where you can spend a couple hours a week dedicated to nurturing creativity. As she explains, a trip to a museum, an old movie, an aquarium, or an old junk store can be just the thing you need to "replenish the well."

## Daily Life

You may think that going to the grocery store or working in a bank doesn't lend itself to exciting ideas, but that needn't be the case. If you set your creative switch to "on," you'll be surprised at the possibilities. Working in a bank could be the source of a great nonfiction book for children: what happens to your money when you put it in the bank? Or a trip to the supermarket with kids in tow could lead to a magazine article entitled "Ten Secrets to Shopping with Children: Or How Not to Commit Murder in Front of the Mushrooms." Overhearing a conversation between an elderly man and a post office clerk (yes, you are encouraged to eavesdrop shamelessly) might offer up the name of a small town that makes you suddenly think of a story you want to set there. Think about the places and the people you interact with on a regular basis. If you take a look at ordinary events with an eye out for stories, you'll see everyday life in a whole new light.

## Music

Song lyrics, from Gershwin to McCartney to Tom Waits, can be the inspiration for novel ideas. Not only can the words stir associations, memories, and emotions, but the music itself can put you in a receptive, creative mood. If you usually listen to country, try opera or rock. Listen to your kids' music or your parents'. Expand your world and your imagination at the same time. Even listening to songs sung in a foreign language can help you conjure up scenarios

to go along with them.

## **Conversations**

Keep an ear out for the way people speak. If you catch the sound of a southern accent, it may put you in mind of a story that could only take place in the South. Think about some of the more interesting conversations you have each day. That discussion about revising a software manual? Perhaps you can develop an idea about a programmer who comes up with a computer language through which he can control the work of the Pentagon. Strike up conversations with fellow sufferers waiting in line at the bank. Eavesdrop. Make a point of saying “hello” and “how’s it going?” to your children’s friends. By speaking to—and, yes, listening in on—as many different people as you can, you may be rewarded with a word or a thought that will set your story in motion.

## **Dreams**

No one seems to know exactly what dreams are, but one thing we do know is that they’re fertile fields for ideas. What was that bit about flying from your house to your ex-boyfriend’s old school? It could be the makings of an idea for a story about old loves. Or it might be the impetus for a children’s book about birds.



Write down your dreams as soon as you wake up (your journal and a pen are, of course, right by your bed). When you think about your dreams later, you may find an interesting idea beckoning.

## **Old Records**

Diaries, family histories, birth announcements. Dusty old files are definitely worth cleaning off. Inside could be some amazing information, from pictures of never-before-seen relations to correspondence that details how things were done decades ago to a pressed flower from a long-ago dance. All can carry your thoughts to new places where exciting ideas may develop. Or, take a trip to your local library to browse through old newspapers and magazines. Who knows, you might breathe life into a long-forgotten story or event.



## **Beautiful/Horrible/Unusual Settings**

Your imagination can be set on fire when your eyes take in a variety of sights. Sit beside a fountain. Look at a burned-out building or forested area. Go to the park or a lake, watch an old house being bulldozed, look at photos of favorite vacations or landscape paintings, or take a trip to a botanical garden. Try to observe as many and as varied outdoor settings as you can. Look not only at colors and textures but think about how the setting makes you feel. Peaceful? Dreamy? Aristocratic? Horrified? Sink into the feelings, and see if one of them helps you formulate an idea.

Here are twelve easy-to-get-to spots for idea gathering:

- The coffee shop
- A quiet garden
- The airport
- The car pool
- Your family room
- The diner
- The elevator
- The park
- A hotel lobby
- A hospital
- The laundromat
- A cemetery

## **Favorite Objects**

Spend some time with some of your favorite things. Sitting in your beautifully crafted Shaker rocking chair may cause you to think about how furniture is made, which may make you think about what sort of person made your chair, which may make you think of a story about a troubled teenager who turns his life around by meeting an older woman who handcrafts beautiful chairs. Let your imagination loose as you observe or touch treasured objects.

## **Favorite Books**

Go back and reread some of your all-time favorites—not to steal the plot or make off with a character, but to reconnect with the story's essence and

remember what made it so appealing to you. Was it the setting? The time period? Because it reflected a personal experience? Get caught up again in what made those books so special, and think about related stories that might make you feel the same way. You can also make note of special passages or inspiring thoughts in a book you're currently reading.

## How to Generate Ideas

Powerful story ideas are waiting to be created. Try some of the following helpful techniques to bring them into being. Just remember: be open to everything and write it all down, no matter how crazy it may seem. It may take a little while, but an engaging idea will come.



You can make characters believable by giving them attributes that real people have: emotions, dreams, goals, habits, skills, flaws, problems, physical characteristics, style, loves, hates, ambitions, secrets, fears, and values.

- Play “What if. . . .” What if that woman walking down the street walked right into a bank and held it up? What if a dog could use a computer? What if your friend hadn’t gone on that blind date and met the man she ended up marrying? What if the Civil War had been won by the South? Choose several different situations and suppose what might happen.
- Play “I wonder. . . .” I wonder if that kid just did something he shouldn’t have because his mom is practically dragging him out of the store. I wonder why penguins can’t fly. I wonder why that man keeps tugging at his ear. I wonder how animals sense earthquakes before they happen. Let your mind roam freely and come up with possible answers.
- Brainstorm with other people. Ask friends and relatives to tell you about memorable experiences. Ask other creative people how they come up with ideas.
- Eavesdrop (surreptitiously). Experiences and opinions you overhear people sharing as they go about their daily lives can become the basis of believable stories.
- Recast favorite stories in a different genre. Turn a memorable mystery into a fantasy. Turn a fairy tale into a modern-day children’s story.
- Use a favorite story as a model. Use the story’s structure, but change the characters and the setting. Or tell the same story through a different character’s point of view.
- Let your mind wander. Sit in a comfortable chair, close your eyes, and see

what happens. Let your thoughts follow any direction they want to go in. If you hear a sound, concentrate on it. If you get a picture in your mind, notice what's happening.

- **People-watch.** The way a couple hold hands and whisper intimately may set you thinking about an idea for a love story. A tattooed muscle man may set off bells for a crime caper. The emotion you feel when a teenager walks by pushing a baby in a stroller may put you in touch with a character for a young adult novel. Watch not only for how people look but how they hold themselves, interact, the kinds of work they do, how they speak, and the time of day they're out and about.



Stay away from stereotypes when developing characters. Attributing unexpected traits, habits or hobbies can make otherwise flat characters come to life. Make the geeky guy a great dancer. Have the rich girl devour superhero comic books. Give the rabbi a gift for electric guitar.

## Idea Exercises

To practice, try some of these writing exercises:

1. Make three lists: one of character types, one of conflicts, and one of settings. Combine the different possibilities until one of them strikes a chord.
2. Make two other lists: one of things you love, and one of things you hate. Create a story in which one character loves one of the things you love and another character loves one of the things you hate. (Remember, conflict is at the heart of all stories.)
3. Create some character sketches to see if inventive characters might help you determine a plot:
  - a. Write a character bio using one quality from each of three friends.
  - b. Think of a memorable movie character and base a new character on him or her.
  - c. Choose a dramatic story from the newspaper and develop a character sketch based on the information.
  - d. Choose a memorable book hero and make him younger or older.
  - e. Create a character description of someone you'd like to know.
  - f. Choose someone you know well and change three things about him or her.
4. Write down ten words that come to mind and combine them into a story synopsis.

5. Think about a place you'd like to visit and develop a story that would be perfect to set there.
6. Describe in a paragraph something you love. Then come up with a story about that thing being stolen.
7. Think of a strong emotion. Then think of five scenarios in which that emotion could be involved.
8. Play with word associations. Write down a good number of words and then write what each immediately makes you think of.
9. Animate an object. Have a toy describe what it's like to play with a child.
10. Think about a decision you made recently. Write about why you made it. Create a scenario of what could have happened if you'd made a different decision.
11. Take the first line from a favorite book and base a new story on it.
12. Freewrite. Even if you have no idea what you'd like to write about, start writing anyway. See what appears on the page. One word or phrase may suggest an idea.

## **Choosing the Best Idea**

Once you've tried some of the approaches suggested above, you'll probably be surprised at how many good possibilities you came up with. Now, you have to choose one to run with.

Before you begin the decision process, let your ideas sit in your notebook or a file folder for a while. You probably won't be able to keep yourself from mulling them over at least a bit, but try to take a break from concentrating on them so you can come back to them fresh. When you're ready, give each one a good look.

## **Pick What's Interesting**

The first criterion is whether or not the idea really captures your imagination. Does it stir your emotions? Is it something you know you can enjoyably spend a good deal of time working on? Is it something worth writing about? Writers need to be passionate about their subjects or it's likely the writing will reflect the lack of interest. If an idea doesn't grab you, you should probably put it aside. Or if something about an idea intrigues you though it doesn't excite

you, give it some more thought and try to come up with a slightly different take. It's the idea that you keep thinking about, and that doesn't let you go, that's probably a good bet.



"Choice of subject is of cardinal importance. One does by far one's best work when besotted by and absorbed in the matter at hand."

—Jessica Mitford, novelist

## Pay Attention to Scope

Second, will the idea generate a work of a reasonable size? Is the subject so broad that you'll need to write a three-volume set to cover it all? That may be taking on too much, and you'll probably want to revise the idea to narrow the focus. On the flip side, is it too narrow? If it's a compelling idea, will you be able to put enough meat on its bones? Putting together a very rough outline or synopsis will help you determine this.

To see if your idea will support a good-sized story, try outlining it with cards. Screenwriters and children's book authors do this, but it's a good technique for any genre. Note each key scene on a card and pin up the cards. Too much for one work? Too little?

## Consider Your Audience

A third point to consider is if the idea involves a topic that a lot of people would be interested in reading about. If you're writing for yourself, any topic that interests you is a good choice. But if you're writing with the goal of being published, you will probably want to think about ideas that will appeal to a broad spectrum of people.



Keep in mind that if your idea is one that's often the focus of articles or novels or memoirs, it may be very difficult to set it in a new light or distinguish it from other stories like it.

## Check the Emotional Factor

Is your idea dramatic? Do you see ways to make it compelling? If you're planning to write a piece of fiction, can you envision engaging characters? Is there an issue to be developed—a conflict around which the story will advance?

Stories need drama and tension to keep readers turning the page. Be sure your idea is filled with possibilities for drawing in an audience.

## **Run with It**

When you've weeded out the not-quite-ready-for-prime-time ideas, sum up and write down in a sentence or two the idea you've chosen. Check it for appeal, conflict, focus, and freshness. If it makes the grade and sets your mind racing, you've probably got a winner. But don't throw away any worthy contestants. Store them away for possible future use.

## **How They Do It**

So where do successful writers get their ideas? Here are some anecdotes that you might find interesting, as well as inspiring.

Author Peter Mayle was in France with friends who took him to a church service where mass was being celebrated in honor of . . . the truffle. Worshippers asked the patron saint of truffles to help them produce a bumper crop, and put truffles in a donation plate to be auctioned off to raise money. The bizarre experience made Mayle wonder if there were other unusual French gastronomical celebrations and festivals. After numerous discoveries, he wrote a book about them called *French Lessons*.

According to Jeffrey Deaver, bestselling crime thriller author, "My keyboard wasn't working quite right and I didn't know quite what the problem was. But I thought, 'You know, it's almost as if somebody is in my computer and looking at all my files right now.' And I thought, 'That's quite a scary proposition.' I'm always looking for scenarios that will engage readers as emotionally as possible."

Shay Youngblood, author of *Black Girl in Paris*, loves to cook; took opera-singing lessons; has been an au pair, an archivist, and a model; has worked in a library; has delivered phone books; and has cleaned houses—and drew on all of these jobs and experiences to create her book's heroine, Eden.

When she sits down to begin the next book in her "alphabet" mystery series, writer Sue Grafton concentrates on her heroine, private investigator Kinsey Millhone. Grafton always begins by asking herself two questions: "Who hires Kinsey?" and "What is she hired to do?"

For George Saunders, creative-writing instructor and author of

*CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, inspiration comes from language. Saunders says he needs one good sentence or idea “and then you just stick with the texture of the prose and say I like the way that sounds.”

British author P. D. James, creator of the Commander Adam Dalgliesh detective series, starts to develop her bestselling murder mysteries with a location in mind: “For me, it’s always the setting,” James states. Her bestseller *Death in Holy Orders* is set in a sinister Victorian theological college on the windswept coast of England.

Aaron Sorkin, award-winning writer of the TV series *The West Wing*, wrote most of the screenplay for the movie *A Few Good Men* on cocktail napkins. The script was loosely based on a case that involved his attorney sister.



“You can’t say to yourself, ‘I think I will have a great idea at 3:47 this afternoon’ and then make an appointment with your head. As soon as something floats into consciousness, you’ve got to grab it.”

—Steve Allen, author and comedian

Several of the Beatles’ songs, including “A Day in the Life” and “She’s Leaving Home,” were inspired by items in newspapers and magazines. Others, including “Getting Better,” came from what was happening around the musicians. When they asked a friend how he was getting on, he always replied, “It’s getting better.”

## Chapter 12. Planning

Now that you've got a solid idea, you probably want to sit right down and start writing. But don't hit the keys yet. Before you begin composing, there are a number of questions you need to answer and a number of steps you need to take.

### Developing Your Idea

You've got to take your raw idea and develop it and to let your creativity get to work. Is your idea going to be the basis for a short story or a novel? A children's book? Perhaps a poem? Who is the intended audience? Will it be told in the first person? Is the story one in which you'll be putting forward a personal message, or will you be relating facts and statistics in a neutral voice? Answering these and other questions will get you ready for writing.



"Finding the right form for your story is simply to realize the most natural way of telling the story. The test of whether or not a writer has divined the natural shape of his story is just this: after reading it, can you imagine it differently, or does it silence your imagination and seem to you absolute and final?"

—Truman Capote, short story writer and novelist

### Purpose

A piece of writing can have several goals, but it's a good idea to have one in mind when you're writing. Your goal may be to teach a skill, share an important experience, explore a specific topic or relationship, write a bedtime story that will soothe a restless child, argue a point, critique the plot of a movie, thank a policeman for helping you in a crisis, or any number of other aims. It's a good idea to write your purpose down and pin it up as a reminder to stay on track.

### Scope

In Chapter 11 you were advised to size up your idea: is it big enough? Too big? At this point you can think about it in more detail. For example, you may have refined your idea from covering all of a famous local politician's life to just the years that she's been in office, but as you shape your idea now you may want to narrow it even further. Instead of undertaking a book, you may want to start



exploring the topic with an article about just one of the many ways in which the politician improved life in your community. If the article turns out well, you can expand on it with another article or perhaps a book. Or you may decide that you're ready now to undertake a big project, and that concentrating on the politician's entire term in office is the best approach. Try to suit the breadth of the project to both the material and to your time and interest.

## **Format**

You may have gone into a project with the idea of writing in a particular genre, for example, a poem or a play. But thinking about format now may produce a different approach. A crazy time from your teen years might be the basis of an exciting memoir, as you originally thought, but it could also be the topic of a very funny poem.



Don't fall into the trap of labeling yourself. Just because you start with poetry doesn't mean you're only a poet. Be willing to at least try other forms of writing, like short stories, personal essays and articles. You may find that you enjoy, and are good at, many different things.

## **Audience**

Who you're writing for can affect the words you use. For example, if you're writing a nonfiction book for toddlers, you'll need to know and use vocabulary and concepts they can understand. Likewise, if you're submitting an article to a niche magazine, you'll want to slant your wording toward that audience; for example, use certain food terms for a healthy-cooking magazine's readers. You should also keep in mind what kind of background information your audience might need in order to understand your point. For instance, if you're writing a book for beginning gardeners, you need to explain terms that experienced gardeners would probably know but beginning gardeners might not. (You can't tell a beginning gardener to 'blanch' if they don't know what 'blanching' is first!) Books for beginning readers will need shorter sentences. Books for teens should incorporate language and information they can relate to.

## **Characters**

If you are writing fiction, you should also start thinking about your characters.

Creating well-written, believable, and interesting characters can make all the difference. The characters' story will evoke interest, create suspense, and draw the readers into the plot.



"If your writing is unfocused, your reader may be out of focus too. When you can't see the target, you don't know where to aim. . . . Clarifying your audience will clarify your thinking and your writing."

—Patricia T. O'Connor, author of *Words Fail Me*

## **Make Your Characters Real**

As you create your fictional population, remember that the best way to help readers get to know them is through their personality and behavior rather than their physicality. You will probably want to include some kind of physical description—hair and eye color, body type—when it comes time to set your people down on paper. But what will really bring your characters to life will be what they're like: how they talk, how they interact with others, what they think about, what their tastes are, what their fears are, their favorite things, their weaknesses, and the way they react emotionally to different situations. These are the things that will make them seem real and be fascinating to read about.

## **A Character Is Born**

If they don't appear out of the blue, characters can be created from your past, your present, your likes and dislikes, your fears, your job, newspaper accounts, your friends, your family, just about anyone or anything. A character could have your husband's way of lining up the dishes by size before washing them. Another character could have your mother-in-law's arrogant demeanor. Your good friend's love of bubble gum-flavored ice cream could be another character's dietary downfall. Let your mind range freely as you create and develop characters.

## **Character Explorations**

Fictional characters can also be compiled by focusing on people outside your usual turf. People watching can be a great way to develop ideas for characters. When you see someone who intrigues you, try giving this person an identity. What's this guy's name? Where was he born? Does he speak with an accent? Has something just happened to make him smile that way? Does he keep

adjusting his tie because he's nervous? Does he always wear dark-colored clothes? Is he meeting someone he hasn't seen in a long time? Does he walk so gracefully because he's an athlete? Do you think you would like him as a friend? Imagine personalities and traits by playing "I wonder . . ." and "What if . . ." while studying passersby; you could even have imaginary conversations with them—it's a great way to develop intriguing characters.



If you base characters directly on friends or family members, you will probably want to change something about them to distinguish them from the real, live people. Those in your immediate circle might be very defensive and unhappy if they recognize themselves in your pages—especially if you show them in an unflattering light.

## **Show, Don't Tell**

To clue readers in on what your characters are like, try to show them rather than tell the reader about them. Telling can be boring and doesn't give readers a chance to connect their own thoughts and feelings to your words. If you write, "Mark really liked to ride his motorcycle," you're just giving basic information. If you write, "Mark smiled as he walked up to the Harley, his long day in front of the computer disappearing with every step," you let readers associate their own experiences with Mark's love of adventure. You also give them much greater reading pleasure. Details that relate not just to sight but to smells and sounds as well—the irritating timbre of a character's voice, the pleasantly sweaty smell of a sleeping child, the stale breath of a cornered killer—add another layer of depth to your creations.

## **An Example of Effective Characterization**

*It took Anthony forever to come to grips with what he was going to wear. The brown suit was too conservative. He wanted to look a little more casual, maybe even a little hip. Not the green sweater either. Frankie always told him he looked like a lizard when he wore it. The tan jacket. It would have to do. He slipped it on and tried to force down the twist of hair that always went its own way. Giving up, he grabbed the card with Jenna's address on it and, with a smile beginning to surface, rushed out the door.*

## **An Example of Less-Than-Effective Characterization**

*Anthony spent a lot of time deciding which clothes to wear. He could wear the brown suit, the green sweater, or the tan jacket. He chose the tan jacket. After he put it on, he tried to comb his hair, but it wouldn't lay flat. Sighing, he picked up the business card with Jenna's name on it. As he left the house he smiled because he was looking forward to seeing her.*

## A Final Caveat

As you show your readers who and what your characters are, work hard to avoid clichés: the tough cop, the timid secretary, the arrogant doctor, the prostitute with a heart of gold. These characters are more like caricatures, and readers won't believe them. Be particularly aware of age, sex, and cultural and ethnicity issues so as not to offend your audience or create inaccurate generalizations.

## Conflict

Characters travel down the road projected by the plot—a string of events that takes them from the beginning of the story to the end. Like road builders, authors connect section after section of their concept so that characters can travel along them to reach their destination. But usually that traveling doesn't go smoothly: conflicts—head-on collisions of events—often beset and besiege the protagonist. These conflicts can be internal, within the main character, or external, issues the main character has with another person, animal, object, a force (like the force of time), government, or nature.



When adding conflict to your story, don't overload characters with too many quirks or problems. You don't want to add so many conflicts that readers—and characters—can't catch their breath.

In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is continually at war with his feelings: with his love for Catherine and his jealousy of those she gives her heart to. In L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, the trigger event is a tornado that takes Dorothy far from her home and leaves her to face a tin man, a scarecrow, a witch, a wizard, and a lion as she attempts to return home.

Conflict is the basis of the drama in a story, and what pulls readers in emotionally and gets them to turn the page. A well-paced and well-developed plot should contain enough instances of conflict to produce tension and emotion

in a continual escalation, but also times of calm when things go more smoothly.

Here is a simple plot, provided by Gary Provost, teacher and author, in *How to Tell a Story*:

*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.*

## Point of View

Author and poet Frances Mayes believes that “Apart from the use of significant detail, there is no more important skill for a writer of fiction to grasp than . . . the control of point of view.”

Any story that’s told is told from a particular perspective. While you’re planning and shaping your story, that perspective may be obvious. For example, if you’re going to create a memoir, you’ll be writing the story from your own point of view. But some ideas present a question: who is going to be telling this story? If there are three main characters involved, which of them will be providing the information? Will all three take turns? Or will an external narrator speak to the reader? Who tells the story and how it is told have a major effect on the tone of a story and greatly affect its meaning. Since readers can receive information from only one viewpoint at a time in order to understand the situation and identify the characters, you need to decide which point of view will work best with your story and intended audience.

There are three main points of view to choose from:

- **First person.** The first-person point of view is used when an external narrator or a character in the story tells it. This viewpoint incorporates the words *I, me, my, mine, we, us, and our* and provides information that only the narrator or the particular character would reasonably have. Telling the story from a personal point of view, the narrator or character can observe all the action and tell readers about his or her reactions and feelings.
- **Second person.** This point of view uses the words *you* and *your* to tell the story. With the second person, the reader is actually addressed and involved

in the action: “You walk up the stairs and turn to face the window. You see the frail boy walking carefully up the street.” While the second-person viewpoint does engage the reader, it can be difficult to carry through a long piece of fiction. It’s an excellent choice, though, for several nonfiction formats such as training manuals and travel guides.

• **Third person.** There are actually two different third-person points of view. Third person limited tells the story through one character’s perspective, and third person omniscient speaks through an “all-seeing eye.” In both cases, the speaker is not part of the story, a major difference from the first-person point of view. The third-person narrator uses the words *he, his, him, her, hers, they, them, their, and theirs*.



To obtain different characters’ perspectives, you can switch between viewpoints. However, you’ll need to take pains to make sure that readers are certain who’s speaking and that the speaker had access to the information he or she is talking about. A confused reader is usually an unhappy reader.

Using the third person, you can go deeply into one character. Third person omniscient gives you a great deal of freedom because you can speak from your own viewpoint or speak as, or reveal the thoughts of, any character.

In nonfiction stories, there are two other points of view. The objective point of view provides readers with facts and observations. The subjective point of view lets the writer inject personal emotions and experiences.

How can you decide which is the best viewpoint to use? There are several things to consider: Which one seems to bring the story to life? Which character is in a position to best tell the story? Through whose emotions and characteristics would you like the reader to experience your work? Would the story have more impact if an omniscient narrator could see and tell everything? Which voice do you feel most comfortable writing in?



Be careful about writing yourself into a corner. In his book, “Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing,” David Morrell explains that a first person viewpoint can be limiting, especially if another character’s perspective begins to seem more interesting.

Think about your story’s structure and focus, and experiment with several different viewpoints until you feel comfortable with one. You might discover that a different character wants to tell the story once you start writing, and you may change to a new voice at that point. You may also find that different pieces work best employing different viewpoints.

# Tone

Depending on the viewpoint you use, the voice that speaks will develop a particular tone. Tone is a reflection of the writer's attitude, manner, mood, or morality, and often reflects his or her personality. The tone of a humorous story could be sarcastic or satiric. A letter to the editor noting a strong disagreement with a community issue could be scornful. A memoir could focus on a surprising situation and be ironic.

What is the difference between irony, sarcasm, and satire?



Irony conveys a meaning that is the opposite of the actual meaning. Ironical statements bring attention to words and phrases and show the difference between an ideal and an actual condition. Sarcasm is harsh or bitter irony. Satire employs sarcasm or irony to make fun of something.

Tone does much to attract or repel a reader, and, when consistent, adds much to the telling of a story. In some works, you may want to adopt a neutral tone and simply relay facts or observations. In others, you'll want to write in a tone that reflects and enhances the concept. If you're expressing anger, you may want to use crisp, hard-charging language. If you're gently chiding, you might use carefully chosen words that mock.

## Irony

Irony has been used in prose and poetry for hundreds of years. Scholars believe it was first used in Plato's *Republic*, where the term meant an underhanded way to take people in. When used by Cicero and other Roman rhetoricians, it implied a meaning opposite to the words used. Much later, in the 1800s and 1900s, several authors developed different views about irony—for instance, that it's a way of looking at life and that it develops from perceiving the absurdity of life.

Today, irony is often explained as an awareness of the difference between appearances and reality or between actions and their results. For example, people say, "Great weather, isn't it?" when a brutal storm is knocking down power lines and sending branches barreling onto the streets. Or, "That really helped, didn't it?" when the best effort to unplug the drain ends up only breaking the plunger. People also use irony to mock or ridicule: You might say, "You're a great chef" to a friend who just burned his Pop Tarts. Irony generally conveys sarcasm or makes fun of something or someone, and though it can be harsh and biting, it can also enliven writing and make a picture particularly clear.



Voltaire and Swift are thought by many to be outstanding ironists. Jane Austen, James Joyce, and Mark Twain are also known for their effective use of this device.

Irony is used both in speech and narration. A narrator might tell us that a character is a fine, upstanding citizen when we have just read that the character cheated on his taxes. Irony is also seen in situations: for example, a movie character laughing maniacally at another character being slobbered on by a dog, when another dog is about to do the same thing to the character who's laughing. In Laurie Colwin's *A Big Storm Knocked It Over*, editor Jane Louise is trying to get an annoying coworker, Sven, out of her office to no avail. He just stands there and mocks her by telling her what a nice greeting she's giving him. Later, when Sven tells Jane Louise that a book designer is a lush, Jane Louise says, unhappily, "How nice for me." Sven goes on to say, "He's one of those Brit types who has been so enchanted by the sound of his own voice for so long that he goes around bleating like a sheep and expecting everyone to fall to their knees at his every utterance." The exasperated Jane Louise can only reply, "Wonderful. Just my type."

## Viewpoint and Tone Exercises

Try the following exercise to practice working with different points of view. Write a few paragraphs about something that recently happened to you using the first person. Then tell the story again using third person, as though you were an outsider on the scene. Which way of writing feels more comfortable or involving? Which gives the story more punch?

To work on your tone, try writing a two-paragraph description of a person you observe. Use a straightforward neutral tone. Then, including the same information, write the description again, this time using a humorous tone. Write it again incorporating a sarcastic tone.



## Chapter 13. Researching

Any piece of writing, be it fiction or nonfiction, may require research. Settings, facts and statistics, character traits, dialogue, and historical references may all need some checking to make sure they're as accurate and reliable as possible so that you as an author maintain your credibility.

### Research Is Fun!

Though the thought of researching may make you groan—you immediately have visions of days slogging through dusty library shelves or in dank basements filled with crumbling boxes—there are so many excellent sources of information available that researching can truly be a pleasure. In fact, some authors get completely caught up in researching their work, and often develop additional ideas that enrich and ignite their work.

### Researching for Nonfiction

Successful nonfiction presents accurate, reliable information—it speaks with a voice of authority. To use this voice even if you're not an expert on your topic, you will need to do some research. Whatever the subject, plan to spend a good deal of time reading, observing, and asking questions.

The library, of course, is where you'll find a lot of the information you're after. Reference librarians are generally amazing resources, and can direct you to fact-filled books, magazines, online resources, and audio-and videotapes on your topic. Your local library is a great starting point, but don't forget nearby university or college libraries and local business archives; many allow at least limited public access to their stacks. Many newspapers also make information available in back issues.



"Whatever the authority of facts, everyone does research to prepare for writing, even writers of fiction, even poets, even if the only library they consult is memory. You can't write without it."

—Richard Rhodes, Pulitzer Prize-winning author

People are also great sources of information. If you're researching a

particular period in history, you may be able to locate a neighbor, colleague, or associate who has a detailed memory of the time. Or you might try to track down a teacher or professor who specializes in the period. Authors of books on your topic may also be willing to talk with you or direct you to useful information. Be sure to let your friends and family know what it is you're researching—often someone will know a “friend of a friend of a friend” who has just the information you're looking for.

As you do your research, take careful notes and then organize and keep them in a safe place. If you interview experts or record your thoughts, be sure to date and label the tapes and keep them away from heat. Make note of publishing information for books and magazines you refer to if you think you'll be including a bibliography or for your future reference. You may also want to make sketches of important objects, buildings, or people that will help jog your memory when you write or that will provide details for illustrations.

## Make It Real

Short stories, novels, and movies can take place just about anywhere: in cities, in the countryside, in any part of the globe, even in outer space or a made-up world. But even a story that takes place in an ordinary house in an ordinary town can be fascinating if the details of the setting are provided with authority and care. When characters interact with the setting, the story will come alive.



Gather as much information as you can. Even if you're writing a nonfiction book for the youngest kids and will actually write very few words, having in-depth knowledge will help you enormously by providing you with a voice of authority and lots of information to choose from.

A good setting not only gives readers a mental picture of where the action is happening, but provides depth and dimension that helps them to understand the characters better. And, just like characters, a story's particular setting can be a key element in the action. Think of Ernest Hemingway's riveting tale *The Old Man and the Sea*. The sea is so important that it's actually part of the title, and it's the setting that enables the hero to wrestle with and vanquish a marlin as he struggles with his past and finds the courage to go on. The setting is almost a character in the story—it has a tremendous effect on the forward movement the plot takes.

## Settings and Genres

For several types of novels, the setting is actually the foundation for the story. In the western, the setting, of course, must be in the American West. In this type of novel, events unfold sometime during the late nineteenth century, and the characters are usually ranchers and farmers who live their lives in small towns and rural areas. Great examples of the western are Jack Warner Schaefer's classic *Shane*, the story of a stranger taken in by a Wyoming family in 1889 who becomes involved in a feud between local cattle ranchers and the homesteaders; and the more modern-day telling of the western story in Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, about a last cattle drive north.

The science fiction novel also takes place in a particular setting—an imagined world. Here characters deal with machines and creatures that don't really exist, are able to do impossible things, such as read each other's minds, and live on other planets or on Earth at a future time. Creating a setting for a science fiction tale can be lots of fun, because your imagination is set loose from reality. But though the setting is made up, much of science fiction is actually based on science and logic, so research should be done to create a believable plot and setting. (Extensive research is also necessary for the western to get the details of both time and place exactly right.)



Most settings require at least some research—otherwise you would need to limit your settings to places you've been and are familiar with.

The following excerpt is from an interview with science-fiction author James Morrow, where he talks about the importance of research in his work.

*Science fiction keys itself to the physical universe and our present knowledge of nature's laws. The serious sci-fi writer is therefore obligated to keep up with new developments in biology, physics, and cosmology, and to achieve a rudimentary understanding of these fields. At the very least, he or she is obligated to avoid populist misunderstandings of contemporary science, such as the several trendy but wrongheaded interpretations of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle that are currently floating around.*

*With fantasy, by contrast, nature's laws are up for grabs. They can be suspended or superseded through magic. So, in theory, the fantasy writer has to do less rigorous research than the science fiction writer, although the typical fantasy epic generally achieves its verisimilitude through the author's familiarity with a particular historical era, most commonly medieval Europe. So even though we usually find "science fiction" and "fantasy" lumped together in the bookstores,*

*at a certain point they part company radically, and it makes about as much sense to shelve the two genres side by side as it does to place vegetarian cookbooks next to vivisection manuals.*

*I've found that if you know nothing at all about some technical aspect you need to understand for a science fiction novel or story, a children's book is often the best place to start. Children's book authors generally have a lot of integrity, write clearly, do their homework, and get their facts straight.*

One other genre that grows from its setting is the war story. Like the western needs the West, the war story needs a war. Though characters are also key in these types of novels, many war stories, such as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, focus on how the hero or a group of heroes struggle against monumental odds—the sounds, sights, and smells of the struggle put the story in context.

To sum it up, rich, powerful settings:

- Are vivid
- Engage the reader
- Use sensory details, not statistics, to create an atmosphere
- Are believable
- Are evocative
- Are suitable to the character and the plot
- Are rooted in time

Short-story writer Susan Fry shares her experience with research:

*"I enjoy [research], and actually I find it difficult to know when to stop doing research. But you have to hit a point where you say, okay, I know enough, I can at least make a stab at this. One of my favorite authors, Kim Stanley Robinson, says, "Skate fast over thin ice." Which means, if there's something you don't know, just wave your hands and hope people don't notice it, and keep going.*

*One of my characters was a police officer in a small town in Texas. I grew up in Texas, but there were a lot of things that I didn't know about the police community there, so I went online, I talked to friends who were policemen, I did the Citizens' Police Academy through the Redwood City Police Department to learn about police procedure. There are a lot of different ways to do research; books are just one way. The best way is to go out and talk to people, which can be hard for writers who are introverts.*

*The San Mateo County coroner let me go through the room where she actually does the autopsies. People love to talk about their work, and if you ask them, most people will be just extraordinarily helpful. Don't be afraid to ask."*

## Try This

To get a feel for how to write a setting, try the following exercise. Choose a nearby spot that you're very familiar with. Go there with your notepad and pen and spend some time *experiencing* the place. Pay attention to the people or animals or buildings, the sounds, the smells, the light, how cold or hot it is, how it relaxes or invigorates you, and the feelings or memories the spot brings to mind. Run your hands over things, change your viewpoint, close your eyes and listen, cover your ears and observe. Note down everything you see, hear, and smell, as well as your thoughts and feelings. Then write a few paragraphs describing the setting as you experienced it. Remember to show, rather than tell.

## Determine What You Need to Know

You can start doing research as soon as you've decided on your story idea. Say you've decided to set a mystery in New Orleans, but you've never been there. You're going to need to learn about the city—what it looks like, how the people speak, exactly where it's located, its attractions, the weather—in order to have your characters live there and make the story believable. Or say you're going to write a memoir about the summer you spent with your grandfather. You remember the trips you took together and the important values he instilled in you, but your recollection of the small town he lived in is fuzzy. If he's still alive, you'll want to ask him a lot of questions to fill in your memory gaps. You may need to read through letters he wrote to you over the years, drive to the town to refresh your memory, or discover if there's a book that covers the local history.



If you write young adult fiction, real-world research is crucial. Go see the latest teen flick, spend some time at the local mall, and visit other teen hangouts. Pay attention to what teens like, what they wear, how they speak, and how they act.

Once you've settled on your main idea, think carefully about the plot or the focus to determine what you're going to need to research. It's a good idea to make a list of all the questions you need answered, which you'll most likely add

to after you start to write. Think about the work from many different angles. Will you need:

- Statistics to support an argument?
- Background information?
- Historical information?
- Advice or analysis from an expert?
- Anecdotes to enliven or illustrate information?
- To interview someone for a personal account or to obtain knowledge you won't be able to find anywhere else?

Make as complete a list as possible of all the information you think you'll need to track down.

## **Gathering the Information**

Next, think about the available resources. These can be grouped into three categories:

- Media sources such as books, magazines, audio-and videotapes, TV, and the Internet.
- People sources, including experts or specialists in particular areas and other people who can provide you with facts, observations, or insights.
- Your own remembrances, experiences, and observations.

Be creative as you think about which sources will be the most helpful. For example, you'll be able to find a good deal of information about New Orleans in an encyclopedia, but a memoir or autobiography by someone who lived in New Orleans will provide additional, and most likely exciting, detail. If you need to dig up family history or interview relatives, make sure to also search through old records, check with pertinent community organizations to see if they published any books that cover the time, read through archived newspaper accounts, and ask friends of your relatives for remembrances or anecdotes. Coming at your research from several different angles will provide you with a full range of rich material to work with.



In this age of the World Wide Web, online sources of information are extremely plentiful and generally useful. Websites abound on just about every topic, so take your research online.

## Prepare to Research

Once you've decided on some sources, prepare any materials you may need to gather the information. You'll probably want a notebook just for research—it helps to divide it up into sections by topic ahead of time. Keeping a file folder and some index cards will help you keep track of and group references. If you plan to interview someone, a tape recorder may be helpful.



If you are going to be quoting some of the people you talk to or include lengthy excerpts of other people's work, you will need to request written permission from them to do so, and therefore should prepare a permission form.

You may also need to prepare some materials. If you will be conducting an interview, write up a list of questions ahead of time. If you're going to be taking a survey, you may want to prepare a formal questionnaire. If you're going to be requesting information by mail, some places may require a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) along with the request.

## Now Start Digging

Go through your list of questions or topics until you've answered each one completely. Take careful notes and include names, phone numbers, dates of contact, publishing information, website addresses, page references—everything you need in case you want to reach a source again or refer to it in your work. Label and date tapes after you complete all interviews. Make any drawings—they don't have to be great—that will help you remember information or that an artist can work from. Take photos or make a video. Ask people to spell their name for you. If one expert can't answer your questions, find another one who can. If a source doesn't seem completely reliable, confirm the information by checking a second source.

One word of advice: Even if you don't enjoy doing research, stick to it and gather as much information as you can. Once you start writing, you'll be very happy to have all that material on hand. It's definitely better to have too much than too little, and you'll find it will make your writing much more exciting and detailed.

## Doing an Interview

Sometimes the best way to get the information you need is by interviewing an expert or an eyewitness. The thought of asking strangers for their help or insights can be intimidating, but often people will be the best resource for answering your questions. While some experts receive requests for interviews regularly and may not be able to accommodate you, many people will be flattered and quite willing to take the time. If you think certain people have information that will help you in your writing, don't be afraid to ask simply because you either think you'd be intruding or because you've never conducted an interview before.

When calling or writing to set up an interview, be friendly and straightforward. Explain your project and what you'd like to talk to the person about, and ask what a convenient time to get together might be. If it fits into the person's schedule, you can offer to take him or her to lunch or out for coffee. A quiet place is best, especially if the person agrees to have the conversation recorded. Do your best to reassure the person that you won't need a lot of time, but if the answer is no, accept it graciously and start to look for another person who might have similar information.



Be prepared for an interviewee to request to read your article before you submit to an editor. It's your decision, but understand that you may get a list of requested changes back from the person you interviewed.

If people seem willing but feel they don't have the time to meet with you, suggest an alternative: either a brief phone conversation or questions via e-mail that they can answer at their leisure. Tape recorders are also available that plug into your phone system to record a conversation.

Once you've set up the appointment, make a list of the questions you want to ask. This may be your only chance to talk with the person, so be sure to include everything you want to know. Type up your list and work from it during the interview. This will not only make it likely that you'll get the information you're after, but it will also remind you to guide the conversation back on track if it goes off in an unexpected direction. If you have the time, though, let the person you're interviewing follow a path you didn't choose but that sounds interesting; you might end up with some very special pieces of information.



Recording phone conversations without permission is illegal in some states, so be sure to ask interviewees while the tape is running to confirm that they agree to it. Some recorders can be set to provide a regular beep tone as a reminder.

During the interview, try to stay in the background. Ask each question, then step back and be an interested listener. If the interviewee has trouble getting



beyond “yes” and “no” answers, rephrase your questions so that the response needs to be some sort of explanation. Instead of asking, “Did the result of that experiment surprise you?” ask, “What were your thoughts when you realized what the experiment proved?” Try to put the person at ease by smiling or nodding, and by being respectful of what he or she is saying. If you take notes rather than, or in addition to, tape recording, look up every now and then to maintain a connection.

At the end of the interview, check your list to see if there’s anything you’ve missed. Then ask the person if there’s anything else he or she would like to add; often an interviewee will think of something particularly useful that wasn’t covered and appreciate the chance to bring up something that he or she feels is important.

## Sorting and Storing

Whew! Now you’re done (at least until you start writing and discover there’s lots more you need to find out). Your notebook is full. You’ve got piles of tapes and index cards. You’ve got printouts from websites. You’ve made copies of information from books and magazines. Time to go through everything and store it safely and effectively.

Index cards can be sorted in a file folder. If you’re going to be writing an article about vacationing in Tahiti, you could separate your material into travel information, weather, beaches, nightlife, and culture. If you plan to write a short story, you could group your information into material that relates to characters, settings, and scenes.



To research his new computer-based thriller *The Blue Nowhere*, bestselling author Jeffrey Deaver learned to write a Basic program, took apart and studied his computer, talked to programmers and technology innovators, and mingled with employees from Hewlett-Packard, Xerox PARC, and Stanford University.

If you have loose pieces of paper, you may want to type up the information on your computer or write it in your notebook. Newspaper clippings could be taped to or copied onto sturdy sheets of paper. Clearly labeled tapes should be stored in a box away from heat. Try to make everything as easy to find and use as possible. Color code, use separate binders, create computer files—whatever makes the information accessible. As you go through everything, you’ll probably find things that you can safely throw away—such as information that seemed useful when you discovered it, but on second look seems unreliable, unhelpful, or off the subject—or something cryptic you jotted down that now makes

absolutely no sense.

## **Chapter 14. Organizing**

Now, after you've done your research, is a good time to firm up your outline or concept and set it down in a way that will help you produce the finished work. Organizing your idea will also let you know if there's additional research to be done.

### **The Organizational Process**

The process of organizing is really the process of thinking through an idea and putting its elements into some order. Some authors like to do this by creating a detailed, formal outline that gives them a complete working blueprint. Others prefer simply sketching out the way the story will progress because they know the details will develop and change along the way. But most writers organize their concept in some way to help them start writing and to give their idea shape.

During the organizational process, you're going to:

- Review all the materials you've collected.
- Decide which areas you want to cover.
- Decide in what order you're going to cover them.
- Make an outline or informal list of key points.

### **Review the Material**

Start by going back over your research notes and any other notes you've made while you were developing your idea and doing the planning. Keep your idea in mind as you organize your notes—in fact, if you haven't done so, you may want to post your idea where you can keep referring to it.

As you look through all the materials you've gathered, a sequence of scenes or information may start to appear. Take notes on your thoughts as they develop. Keep thinking about what you want to say and how you've planned to say it.

### **Decide Which Areas to Cover**

While you did your research, you may have collected information on more areas than you can comfortably cover or on areas that on second thought just don't seem that interesting. As you continue to think about your outline or key points, decide if some pieces are better left out. For example, if you plan to write about the history of your town, you may want to forego covering the construction of the post office because it actually replaced the small building that was already there and didn't effect any change on the town.

Including uninteresting information just because you gathered it, trying to work in something that you find interesting but that just doesn't fit, or covering too much territory in a short piece can keep your work from being its best. If you have trouble deciding what to leave in and leave out, try to think about the idea as though you know nothing about it. What would you like to know as a reader? You can also ask friends what they would be interested in reading about.

## Decide the Order

Ordering your topics or scenes will help you to write a smoother, more logical, better-structured story. It will also help your readers to understand and enjoy it.

There are several organizing patterns to choose from, depending on the type of story you plan to write. Choose the one that best suits the material and the way you like to work.

- **Chronological order.** This pattern is popular with both fiction and nonfiction writers because it can work well with just about any kind of narrative writing. Using this method, you set down scenes following a time frame: This happened, then that happened, then that happened. If you're writing a memoir about a trip to your daughter's new home right after she returned from her honeymoon, you could describe driving there, then being greeted by the newlyweds, then being given the staggeringly awful painting your new son-in-law brought back from their trip especially for you.
- **Logical order.** This works well with critical pieces and arguments. You start with your viewpoint or what you want to prove, and then present the reasons, facts, and examples that make your case.
- **Rank order.** With this pattern you present information according to an attribute. Size, for example could be broken down from largest to smallest or smallest to largest.
- **Order of importance.** When writing an essay or report, you can list supporting reasons or arguments from what you consider to be the least

important to the most important, or vice versa.

- **Sequential order.** This pattern is great for use with how-to materials: to organize the step-by-step process for throwing a clay pot, planting an herb garden, or repairing a roof.

- **Cause and effect order.** This organizing method connects a result with the events that came before it. It can help you explain why something happened as well as allow you to predict what will happen because of what has already taken place.

There's another option if you're writing a novel: you could start at the end of a character's life and refer back to different times in his life. This has been a successful tool for many authors, and seems to be most common among memoir-type fiction. Two key points if you try this format: be careful not to confuse the reader by not clearly defining the "when" of each scene, and don't give away so much of the ending at the very beginning or the reader has no incentive to keep reading.

## Make an Outline

Some authors don't like this step at all—they think it's a waste of time because they've learned that one sentence leads to another and one idea leads to another once they start writing, and the work takes shape in an intuitive, rather than a structured, way. Other authors really get into their outlines. They make flow charts and diagrams and graphs, or complete poster-size pages of detailed scenes, lead sentences, chapter titles, and character actions.

Whatever your inclination, some sort of outline, even a sketchy one, can be a helpful tool in the creative process. An outline lets you start to set down on paper the story that you've been imagining and developing in your head.

The type of outline you make is a matter of choice. Some authors go with the format many of us learned in school. Here is a typical example:

### **"Why No One Should Ever Go to a Class Reunion"—working title**

I. Why I decided to go

A. Tenth anniversary of graduation

1. Background info

2. Out of school long enough to see changes

B. See if the "predictions" came true

1. See if Bob really was "most likely to succeed"

2. See if Joan is still "most popular"

3. See if everyone still thinks I'm "best dressed"

C. See my old boyfriend

1. Did he live without me?

2. Is he divorced now, too?

II. Getting there

A. Remembrances while driving

1. Last time I saw Jenny and Laurie

2. Graduation day

And so on.

Others choose to make just a simple list of major points:

- Background info and reasons to go—tenth anniversary, check out what certain people are doing now, definitely find out about Bernie
- The drive there—remembering disasters and high points
- The reunion—changes, good and bad

Others are most comfortable with the index card method. On each card they jot notes about a particular scene or area to cover—the main idea and perhaps a few details—and then put the cards into what seems to be a realistic order following the organizational pattern they chose.



Choose a method to try; you'll probably be able to tell quickly if it's going to help you with your writing. If it's not looking good, try another way of sketching out your plan. Different writers have different methods that they've worked out over time.

Just remember that however you put it together, your outline is not set in stone; you can be creative in your approach to making your outline, and you can also always change the outline itself. In fact, you can count on changing at least one point in your outline somewhere along the line, because new ideas are going to keep coming to you throughout the writing process. If you're writing fiction, characters may also direct you on a completely different course.

But for now, get something down. Imagine the story with a powerful beginning, middle, and end. What should come first? What would logically follow? What would tie the story up? Consider what readers would want to know. Think about what you want to say. Improvise. Brainstorm. Create. Then, once you get something down, take a good long look at it. Does the sequence of events make sense? Is everything in chronological order or in the pattern you decided on? Are there gaps in the structure or the logic? Is there interest and tension? What's missing? What doesn't fit? Keep rearranging, adding, and subtracting until you feel a flow and see a strong, inventive story running

smoothly and clearly from dramatic start to satisfying end.

## **The Hook**

No matter what the genre, what you write needs to start with something that immediately captures the reader's attention. This “hook” pulls the reader right into the story and sets the tone for the events that follow. These events provide the conflict, tension, and interest that carry the readers—hungry for every page—to the powerful conclusion that resolves the crisis or brings them understanding and satisfaction.

## **Group Your Materials**

Now it's back to all those research materials you collected (and organized so well). Take them out again and start assembling them according to the entries on your outline (or list or cards). You can either group them on your desk or in a nearby folder, titled (“Everything about Art Museum”) and in outline order, or you can make a new list, using the outline or original list as your foundation. For example, if an entry on your original outline is “A. Talk about the new museum of art,” you could list that point again and then under it list the information you've researched:

- A. Talk about the new museum of art
  - Admission price, hours, current exhibit
  - Setting, look of building
  - Interview with curator

As you do this grunt work, keep thinking about your idea. Is there a hole in your outline? For example, should you cover the day before your detective meets the teenager who becomes her sidekick, so the reader has more background information? Would a traveler want to know about the different ways of getting to the hotel? If you think so, then you need to do more research and add to your outline.



Mystery writer Jean Bedford outlines her projects in the following way: She writes a synopsis of the main plot and subplots; writes an account of the crime, who did it, and why; makes detailed notes about the circumstances of the crime; and lists main characters and their attributes.

Your outline and your materials will also tell you if you have any unnecessary elements. For example, though the information you discovered about a visitor to your town's centennial celebration might be fascinating, by looking at your outline you'll be able to see that it really doesn't provide information about the celebration itself, which is the focus of your article. Weed that material out—painful as it may be—and save it for another day and another project.



## Chapter 15. Rhetorical Devices

Creative writers do not merely provide their readers with information—information must be presented effectively and with style. To write in a fresh and interesting way, writers employ rhetorical devices.

### Words at Your Disposal

One way to paint vivid word pictures is to use powerful adjectives and other parts of speech that help readers visualize the message. Precise and expressive words let readers see in their minds just what the writer sees in his or her mind, enriching understanding and the communication process.

Writers also have at their disposal a number of language devices that they use to provide visual help to the reader and to layer and draw attention to meaning. Rhetorical devices work not only to create an image, but also to help readers see the familiar in fresh ways and to add interest and excitement to reading. They also evoke strong feelings. By employing a variety of figurative language and writing devices, you can enliven your prose and provide increased reading pleasure.

### Employing Rhetorical Devices in Your Writing

Using rhetorical devices will probably come naturally. That's because all of us use these constructs in our daily lives—without even thinking about them. How often have you said you've read zillions of books on a subject? Or that traffic was moving at a snail's pace? Or that your kid's room looks like a bomb went off in it? We all use figures of speech every day to make a point, communicate a feeling, or draw attention to a fact—it's a very human way of expressing ourselves. Comparing, exaggerating, understating, personifying, and using humor and sounds to get across a message can also be a lot of fun.



Rhetoric is the art of effectively using language for persuasion in speaking or in writing; a rhetorical device is an artful arrangement of words to achieve a particular emphasis or effect.

That's not to say that you should immediately start to pepper your prose with a shakerful of figurative devices. The judicious use of image-makers will add much to your work, while their overuse will ruin it.

When you use language to build images, try to incorporate all five senses. A description of a trip to the beach could include what you see: stork-legged children burning off the pall of winter; what you hear: radios bleating; what you smell: the summer scent of hot dogs and sunscreen; what you taste: once-cold lemonade that's lost its snap; what you feel: sunburned skin as parched as paper. Sensory wording will help you show rather than tell, and give readers many ways to paint pictures of their own. Studying poetry may help you see how important and effective this type of wording can be.

Coming up with inventive, memorable language will take time and practice, but it's definitely worth the effort you put into it. Using figurative language will add depth and power to your words. And lucky you—the English language is one of the richest and the largest in the world, with hundreds of thousands of words to choose from. Just think of the possibilities!

## **Alliteration**

Alliteration is the repetition of a beginning sound, usually a consonant, in two or more words in a phrase. Often found in poetry, this figure of speech can also be effective in prose. Alliteration is a very old rhetorical device in English verse, and was an essential part of a poem's metric scheme until the late Middle Ages. In the late nineteenth century, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins revived the use of alliteration for achieving special effects. In his poem "Spring," he wrote:

*Nothing is so beautiful as spring—*

*When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush . . .*

The poet W. H. Auden also experimented with alliterative verse, as in these lines from *The Age of Anxiety*:

*For the others, like me, there is only the flash*

*Of negative knowledge, the night when, drunk, one*

*Staggers to the bathroom and stares in the glass . . .*

Today, alliteration still can be found in poetry, as well as in slogans, jingles, book and song titles, fiction and nonfiction, and even product names—think of Beanie Babies and Silly String. The repetition of sound draws attention to the words whose consonants make that sound, asking readers or listeners to pause to reflect on them and “see” an image. Alliteration can also set up a cadence or rhythm, adding a musical quality to your words. In fact, you might want to study song lyrics, particularly standards, for alliteration inspiration.

## Allusion

An allusion is a phrase or passage that refers to another work of literature or art, or to a fact or a person or an event or a thing. In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville calls a beggar a “Lazarus,” referring to a beggar in the Bible in the parable about the rich man and the poor man. Melville also calls a character a “Job,” making another biblical reference to a good man who was severely tested but stayed true to his beliefs.



The idea in making an allusion is to enrich and give depth to a concept by associating it with something else the reader has experienced or knows. For an allusion to be successful, then, it's necessary for the reader to be able to pick up on it and understand the reference.

Keep your audience in mind when making allusions in your writing. Allusions work only if readers are familiar with what you are referring to. Think of cultural icons or ideas that are common knowledge: baseball games, a child's habits, Christmas celebrations, or a character in a Dr. Seuss book. An allusion to any one of these could enhance the meaning of your writing because these are things that most people are familiar with.

Using targeted, inventive allusions can add greatly to readers' understanding. The most common references in allusion include the Bible, mythology, and classic literature like the works of William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

## Allusions in Everyday Speech

Adding allusions to your writing may seem like a difficult undertaking, but you most likely already make them unconsciously in conversation or come across them in daily life. For instance, when your husband suggests taking away your errant teenager's driving privileges for three weeks, you may say, “That

seems a bit Draconian.” You’re alluding to Draco, the seventh-century Athenian lawmaker known for establishing a severe code of laws. With a little bit of effort, it’s likely that you can come up with allusions that will enlighten, expand, or add playfulness to your prose.

## Analogy

An analogy is an extended comparison between two different things. In an analogy, you point out several things that are alike about what you’re comparing, even though the items or events are completely different. This kind of comparison can help a reader understand a difficult or complicated idea, and it allows the writer to get very creative.



“All mentality begins in analogy; in the act of recognizing the essential likenesses and essential differences, and of discovering how such likenesses and differences illuminate the interrelation of things.”

—John Ciardi, critic and poet

In a letter to the editor, you might want to urge other community members to join you in protesting the closing of your local library branch. When you talk about the importance of books, you could say, “Books are like food. Some are meat and potatoes, and fuel our daily lives. Some are candy, and treat us with their sweet flavor. Some are hard to chew, and must be consumed slowly and carefully. Books sustain us and help us grow in so many ways.”

In her book of essays entitled *High Tide in Tucson*, Barbara Kingsolver continues an analogy from the first essay through to the last that compares herself and a crab she unknowingly brought home in a shell from a vacation in the Bahamas. Kingsolver begins her book with “A hermit crab lives in my house.” She then relates through the many stories, how, like Kingsolver herself, the crab is hiding out, tries on and casts off different homes (seashells), began life with soft skin that hardened over time, and has become larger since it molted from its soft shell. Kingsolver ends the book by saying, “And so I have molted now, crawled out of my old empty banged-up skin with a fresh new life. . . . Right now, this minute, time to move out into the grief and glory. High tide.” Analogies come in all sizes and can be an excellent way to paint pictures and make connections.

## Metaphor and Simile

The metaphor, and its close friend the simile, are commonly used figures of

speech. The term *metaphor* came from the Greek word *metaphora*, which means “carrying from one place to another.” So in a metaphor, the meaning is carried over from one term to another. In other words, something is described in terms of something else. For example, “the beach is a cream-colored scarf.” A simile, on the other hand, is like a very brief analogy, where the two terms are compared, instead of the one term’s meaning being carried over to the other. For example, “the beach is like a cream-colored scarf.” You can easily recognize a simile because each one uses *like* or *as* to make the comparison.

## **Metaphors Illuminate Meaning**

Metaphors paint particularly vivid pictures because they indirectly compare two very dissimilar things. By using effective and unusual metaphors, writers can intensify as well as stretch their images and ask readers to think about their ideas in new ways. Well-crafted metaphors can also add zing to your writing.

Metaphors are used to describe people, places, things, and actions. You might say the taxi driver in front of the airport bulldozed his way through the crowd to claim you as a passenger. The image of a powerful, ground-chomping bulldozer intensifies the picture of a man forcing his way through a crowd. To describe a bad guy who’s extorting a victim in your mystery, you might refer to him as a scraggly haired python. Pythons, of course, don’t have hair, but by describing a scruffy-looking mobster as a snake that squeezes and crushes its prey, you give readers another way of thinking about your villain. Using metaphors, you can call your childhood home an altar to the saint of political correctness, or M&M’s a rainbow for your mouth. Metaphors can be constructed with incredibly dissimilar objects, as long as one gives deeper meaning to the other.

## **Get to the Point with a Metaphor**

Metaphors can also help you to eliminate unnecessary or unwanted words from your writing. You could take paragraphs of valuable space describing a setting: well-dressed people sitting along the shore of a river, the trees a swirl of bright green, the sunny, relaxed mood of the moment. Or just use a metaphor —“it was a Seurat painting come to the shores of the Allegheny.” With a metaphor, you paint a vivid picture with just a few words.

Exercise your imagination by creating some unusual metaphors. Make two lists of very different things, then compare something in one list to something in the other. Be open and playful, and try to look at the items, actions, people—whatever you’re comparing—in new ways.



When you're writing, be it fiction, nonfiction, or poetry, effective metaphors will probably just come to mind. Don't try to force them; though powerful metaphors do enrich writing, you don't need a huge number of them in every piece you write. Forced metaphors will probably come off as forced and will distract more than they enlighten. Better to be open to compelling metaphors, but let them develop naturally and only when appropriate.

## **Warning!**

Don't use what author Janet Burroway calls "dead metaphors"—comparisons that have been used so often that they no longer have any effect. "My love is a rose," "the eyes are the windows of the soul," and "the world is a stage" have been heard so often that we don't even notice the metaphor, let alone gain insight from it. Tired, stale metaphors will add nothing to your work, but lively, fresh ones will add a great deal.

Still another "don't": Don't mix your metaphors. That means don't compare one thing to two or more different things. For example, "The cinder blocks of his hate became a tornado of rage" is a badly mixed metaphor. Cinder blocks describe hate as a heavy, powerful, building force; also calling hate a tornado confuses the image and sends it in a different direction. The best metaphors communicate an idea simply and clearly and create one strong image at a time.



When constructing similes and metaphors for children's books, be sure to make comparisons that children will understand. Well-crafted comparisons will help make abstract concepts concrete and develop children's ability to analyze and associate. Freshly worded comparisons will also encourage children's love of language.

## **Simile Is Like a Metaphor**

Like metaphors, similes clarify and enhance images by comparing one thing or action or idea to another, dissimilar one. Similes can also heighten and intensify readers' understanding of what the author is trying to accomplish by asking them to slow down and make connections. Like metaphors, similes can paint a concrete image of an abstract idea.

In order to be effective, similes should not only enlighten but also surprise. Tired, overused similes—sweating like a pig, as white as a ghost, as cold as ice,

night fell like a curtain—do little to add color or clarity to a word painting. When you create similes, be sure to construct them in fresh, imaginative terms.

Like powerful metaphors, powerful similes work their magic by creating images with details of sound, sight, taste, smell, and touch. Shakespeare was the master of the simile, but modern pros know how to use this figure of speech to achieve powerful results as well. Pulitzer Prize–winning author Michael Chabon constructs brilliant, sensory similes in his 1995 novel *Wonder Boys*, such as this one: “The whiskey tasted like bear steaks and river mud and the flesh of an oak tree.” You’ve probably never tasted any of these three things, but you immediately know what Chabon is saying: There was an intense smokiness and earthiness—life—in that swallow.

Another of his compelling similes paints a picture with both sight and sound: “The top [of the car] was down and I listened to the hiss of the wheels against the street, the flow of wind over the car, the sound of Stan Getz blowing faintly from the speakers and trailing out into the air behind us like a pearly strand of bubbles from a pipe.” The language isn’t flowery, it’s simple and straightforward, and we connect with the image quickly and hear the music floating by.

When should I use a simile?



There are no rules to follow, but you may want to consider inserting similes if your writing seems a little plain or unexciting. Similes can add vigor to your words while they give insight to your readers.

## Conceit

A simile (and a metaphor) can be constructed in the form of a conceit. This term began life centuries ago as a synonym for *thought* or *concept*, and now has come to mean an extended figurative device used to delight or inform through its witty or unusual comparison. The understanding and pleasure readers receive from a conceit is more intellectual than sensory because the two things that are compared are wildly different. It’s usually not easy for the reader to make the connection, and so the author must explain it in order for the conceit to make its point; when the connection is made, a little light bulb clicks on.

Conceits are often used in poetry, but they can add wit or offer a very fresh way of looking at things in fiction and nonfiction as well. The poet John Donne used them often in his work; in a “verse letter” to a beloved friend, he compared receiving a letter from the friend to alms to show the importance of his friend’s affection:

*And now thy Almes is given, thy letter is read,*

*The body risen againe, the which was dead,*

*And thy poore starveling bountifully fed.*

Centuries later, novelist Tom Robbins used the conceit in a more humorous way: He compared juggling to writing on a typewriter, to emphasize the difficulty and precariousness of being an author:

*My old typewriter was named Olivetti. I know an extraordinary juggler named Olivetti. No relation. There is, however, a similarity between juggling and composing on my typewriter. The trick is, when you spill something, make it look like part of the act.*

Creating a conceit can give you a chance to come up with truly inventive comparisons to enrich your writing: love and a porch (both are home to human interaction, both are a place where most people would like to spend time, both can be walked all over); time and a termite (time eats away at life, a termite eats away at your home); and whatever else your creativity cooks up.

## Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia, sometimes called “imitative harmony,” is the forming of words that imitate a sound and that are associated with the object or action making the sound. The term is derived from the Greek word *onomatopoeia*, which means “the making of words.”

For example, in “clanging of the bells,” *clanging* is a word that sounds very much like the sound a bell makes when it’s rung. The word *crackle* sounds like the sound a fire makes, or the rough noise we hear when something stiff is folded or broken. *Whoosh* sounds like the noise we hear when something speeds by. *Meow* is just like the cry a cat makes. All of these are pretty familiar forms of onomatopoeia, but poets and prose writers alike use inventive forms of this tool to add a further dimension to their work. In fact, you may want to create some onomatopoeic words of your own—try reading Lewis Carroll’s poem “Jabberwocky” for inspiration.



Consider using words like *gush*, *mumbling*, *whirr*, and *plunk*. These onomatopoeic terms will add sensory detail as well as provide readers with more complete understanding.



## Phanopoeia

Poets have also used a form of onomatopoeia to create visual images in their readers' minds. This is called *phanopoeia*, from the Greek word meaning "making something visible." An example of phanopoeia is found in D. H. Lawrence's poem "Snake":

*He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom*

*And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over*

*the edge of the stone trough*

*And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,*

*And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small*

*clearness*

*He sipped with his straight mouth, . . .*

The rhythm, pace, and longer length of the lines create the image of a snake's slow and winding motion.

## Personification

To personify an inanimate object or an idea means that you give it human attributes. Personification provides another way to make a comparison and to give deeper meaning to a concept. It's an effective writing tool because readers intuitively understand human traits and qualities and therefore can easily grasp the concept the writer is conveying.

Personification is found in both poetry and prose and even in jingles, advertising, and cartoons. In poetry, personification has been used for centuries. Here are some examples:

- "Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay . . ." (Dylan Thomas, from "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night")
- "The moon . . . drags the sea after it like a dark crime" (Sylvia Plath, from "The Moon and the Yew Tree")

- “So the loud laugh of scorn, . . . *From the deep drinking-horn* Blew the foam lightly.” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, from *Ballads*)

Personification, when used sparingly and well, can be an excellent tool for helping readers connect to your images and ideas.

Personification also has a long history of prose usage. In his 1935 classic *Tortilla Flat*, John Steinbeck described nature in human terms when he wrote, “every tree crept stealthily along . . .” and the “tree-tops in the wind talked huskily, told fortunes and foretold deaths.”

In his powerful 1963 novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Ken Kesey described the onset of unwanted winter as heralded by the arrival of flocks of geese. He wrote: “All the little coast towns listened, and all despised the geese in those first dingy November days.”

## **Repetition**

When you saw repetition listed here as a rhetorical device, you might have wondered why. Probably you’ve noticed that the repetition of words can make writing boring or produce sentences that have no rhythm or are just badly constructed. You wouldn’t want to write: “It was a great day when we went to visit our Aunt Roberta, because she was a great pianist and we had a great time when we went to see her.”

But repetition, when used well, can actually emphasize a point, heighten drama, and tie elements together. Words, sounds, phrases, syllables, allusions, stanzas, metrical patterns, and ideas can all be repeated in poetry and prose. Be aware, though, that repeating words or elements should be added carefully to your writing and for a specific purpose.

Repetition can be used to great effect in song lyrics. The repeated sounds or words can set up a rhythm that adds to the language’s musical quality, focuses the message, and supports or draws attention to the melody. One excellent example is found in Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart’s “Blue Room,” from the 1926 musical *The Girl Friend*. The word *room* is repeatedly used: “We’ll have a blue room, *A new room*, For two room . . .,” setting up a rhythm that works with the melody. According to Rodgers, “All the rhymes and inner rhymes occur on the same note, C. Every time you are going to hear the half note which is the center of the melody, it is preceded by the repetition of C and the rhyme. And this half note is always the note which carries . . . the word *room*, the most important word in the song . . . both words and music are used to underscore the

note which gives the song its individuality.”



Many hymns use repetition by having singers repeat the chorus after each verse. This often helped church and choir members memorize songs.

Repeating words in speeches can add great dramatic intensity. A famous and brilliant use of repetition is found in a speech Winston Churchill delivered in 1940, when Nazi Germany was threatening to conquer England: “We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence . . . we shall defend our island. . . . We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields . . . we shall fight in the hills . . . We shall never surrender.”

Churchill’s repeated use of the phrase “we shall fight” gave both rhythm and power to his words. Using the phrase he describes how Britain will fight in every place and in every way, and will never give up. The phrase also worked as a rallying call to Churchill’s countrymen to take up the fight and to join him in his determination never to surrender.

## **Dramatize and Emphasize**

In poetry, many writers, past and present, have used repetition to good effect. For instance, in his poem “The Bells,” Edgar Allan Poe repeats the subject word several times in each stanza. The repetition of the word unifies the stanzas while drawing attention to the different emotions bells invoke. Poe speaks of silver bells, mellow wedding bells, loud “alarum” bells, the anger of the bells, the throbbing of the bells, the moaning and the groaning of the bells. The poem gains momentum and strength through the continuing and strategic use of the word *bells*. Other poems by Poe, including “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven,” also exhibit moving use of repetition.



Repeated nonsense words and simple words also beguile children and encourage a love of language. Just think of the Dr. Seuss classics, Margaret Wise Brown’s *Good Night Moon* , Russell Hoban’s *Bread and Jam for Frances* , and Robert Munsch’s *Love You Forever* .

Repetition can also be used to great effect in children’s books. Recurring words, phrases, and sounds can keep children fascinated and encourage prereaders to participate in story time. In *Pierre: A Cautionary Tale in Five Chapters and a Prologue*, Maurice Sendak writes of “a boy named Pierre who

would only say, ‘I don’t care!’” Pierre says “I don’t care” again and again, and nearly every child who listens to this story will soon be saying it right along with him.

## Understatement

Understatement is a figure of speech that makes a point through subtlety and humor. When you understate a point, you couch it in terms less strong than the facts indicate; you make your point lightly rather than with drama. Instead of writing that a nuclear bomb is the most terrifying weapon of mass destruction, you could write that a nuclear bomb would inconvenience an awful lot of people. The reader would think, “Inconvenience! A nuclear bomb could wipe out an entire country!” and immediately get your point. Using understatement allows writers to make the point by showing it to readers from a completely different angle.

### Understatement of the Point

Many authors employ understatement in the short story and novel, but it is also a valuable tool in the screenwriter’s and nonfiction writer’s toolbox. In film, understatement can get a point across in few words instead of taking valuable time for explanations. A classic example is found at the end of *Casablanca* , after the French police captain Louis Renault decides to conspire with bar owner Rick Blaine to let the woman he loves escape danger. Louis does something that wins him to Rick forever, and all Rick says is, “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”



Understatement prevents writing from becoming melodramatic or overwrought. For example, a long diatribe on the evils of nuclear weapons might actually turn readers off, since they already know the horrific destruction these weapons cause.

Columnists and reviewers also use clever understatement to get a good laugh from readers. Miss Manners, a champion of witty remarks, uses understatement often. Responding to a single woman who wondered if it would be a good idea to ask a man out for coffee so she could find out if he was married, Miss Manners wrote, “it will take a few sips of coffee—not many—to find out whether he lives with someone, or if he believes that any lady he takes up with should make it up to him for the rotten way his ex-wife treated him.

Miss Manners would think you would consider that worth knowing.” Well, *of course* she would! Using subtlety and wit, the point is made lightly, rather than through a long, serious explanation.

Another master of witty understatement, *New Yorker* movie critic Anthony Lane, enhances readers’ understanding of his reviews—and their reading pleasure—by making low-key movie and TV references. In his review of the movie *Sexy Beast*, Lane details how the main characters, ex-crook Gal and his wife Deedee, get back into the game. He sums up his review by saying that he knows the ideal neighbors for Gal and Deedee: “a loving couple from New Jersey, dreaming of decency and contentment with a few old habits to kick. A Mr. and Mrs. Soprano.”



In praising an understated scene in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, editor and author Patricia O’Connor notes that she admires it for “what’s left out. Without realizing it, we provide the missing pieces as we read. We use our imagination. And . . . we remember that scene as being more impassioned than it actually is.”

Children’s book authors can also use understatement to good effect. While exaggeration is a favorite of youngsters, understatement can also make a big impact and encourage children to think about things in new ways. Understated remarks can work especially well in picture books, emphasizing a point in the illustration by coming at it from a different angle. In Steven Kellogg’s *Can I Keep Him?* a boy who’s been asking his mother if he can keep a number of animals—from a lost kitten to a fawn to a python—asks if he can keep “a bear that fell off a circus train.” The drawing shows an enormous, scruffy bear destroying the family’s living room, surrounded by several people holding their nose and looking like they’re about to be sick. Kellogg uses charming understatement when he has the mother say, “No, dear. Bears have a disagreeable odor.”

On the flip side of understatement is hyperbole, which is exaggeration or overstatement. Hyperbole can sometimes get your point across more quickly and more easily than a serious presentation—but watch out for tired forms: “As big as the ocean” is “as old as the hills.”

## **Chapter 16. Word Usage Pitfalls**

Writing creatively is hard work. You have to search for the right story, the right words, and the right style. It's a continuing process of experimentation and examination, of insight and rewrite. You need to be open to inspiration, yet guard against the writing pitfalls that can infiltrate your work.

## Part of the Rewriting Process

When you first draft your story, you should concentrate only on getting it down, using any words that come to mind. Then, during editing and evaluating, you can spend more time selecting the precise words and structure that will make your story rocket off the page. While you're looking for those perfect words, you should also look for—and eliminate—any imperfect constructions that keep your work from soaring.

The words you tie together need to evoke an image. They won't be able to do that unless they're strong and colorful. Your story may be filled with compelling information or fascinating characters or moving ideas, but readers won't bother reading it unless your language is rich and exciting.

Make the effort to put together sentences that will grab your readers' attention and inject life into your story. Check each one carefully to see if it sends the message or image you have in your mind. Then replace any word that's not doing its job. You may have to scour your journal or spend time with your friend the thesaurus, but when you come up with that perfect word, you—and your readers—will be very happy you did.

## Clichés

Clichés are old hat. They're over the hill. They have one foot in the grave (actually, two). They're dry as dust. They're dead as a doornail. They don't have a leg to stand on. Get it? Noteworthy creative writing is fresh, inventive, and sparkling—the exact opposite of the cliché.



Clichés really **are** as old as the hills! Plutarch is said to have coined “one foot in the grave” in a.d. 95. “Rome was not built in one day” was included in John Heywood’s 1546 collection of English colloquial sayings called **Proverbs**.

Clichés are overused words and phrases. When they were first created, they were considered fresh and inventive and did what creative phrases are supposed to do: convey an idea or an image in imaginative terms. The expressions we now think of as clichés grew to be so well loved that they were repeated everywhere, and became so commonplace that they lost their spark.

Not all clichés are old. Watch out for current overused phrases or trendy wordings that have caught on from popular movies, TV shows, song lyrics, and advertising. “Make my day” is a good example of this.



Now, when we read or hear a cliché, we don't even think about the message or the image it was meant to send. Worse, if we read a story or an article that's full of clichés, we think it's boring, and that the writer hasn't put much effort into the piece. Searching out and removing as many trite offenders as possible from your work will keep your readers from beating a hasty retreat. (Did you catch that one?)

When someone starts to say "Accidents will . . . ," do you fill in the word *happen* before the person says it? If you can finish an expression after hearing or reading the first few words, you're dealing with a cliché. To help banish clichés from your repertoire, practice rewriting the following tired expressions in lively, forceful language:

- As free as the breeze
- Easier said than done
- Get to the heart of it
- Hit the nail on the head
- As slow as molasses

Keep in mind that expressive terminology needs to be framed with fresh appeal. Then, whenever you want to use an expressive phrase and come up with a cliché, remember that the thought may be a good one, but the wording and the approach need to change.

## Weak Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, and Adverbs

To write we need words, and luckily there are so many to choose from! That means you don't have to settle for any word that's ordinary or inexact or lifeless; you can hunt down the very one that will convey your image exactly. Take the time to choose strong, expressive, specific words that will make your writing soar.

How can I increase my vocabulary to have more words to choose from?



Read a lot of books. Make good friends with your thesaurus. Also be on the lookout for exciting language in newspapers and magazines and on TV or the radio. Jot down every word that catches your fancy in your always-handly notebook. Do crossword puzzles that supply you with the answers so you can learn new words, phrases and names.



## Nouns

Sometimes there won't be any question about the right noun to use: it will be the name of a character or a city or an event, a proper noun. But if you're writing about general things, using common nouns—for example, *children* — you'll want to avoid using the word over and over again and come up with colorful synonyms that keep your writing from being dull. Instead of *children*, you could use *young ones*, or *preteens* (if that's the age group you're writing about), or *diaper denizens* (if you're writing about very young children), or *the knee-high crowd*, or *the stroller set*, or *toddlers*, or *those in the "no."*

Use your imagination to develop nouns or noun phrases that keep your writing fresh and engaging. Think in terms of sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste. While you may think that vivid description comes about through the use of adjectives, it is actually nouns that do most of the showing.

To see this for yourself, write a few sentences that don't contain any adjectives. If you choose hard-working nouns, you may be pleasantly surprised with the images you create.

## Verbs

The word *verb* comes from the Latin word *verbum*, which means “word.” This fact should give you an idea of how important verbs are in the construction of strong, image-making sentences.

Verbs describe action, so make them action packed. If you want a character to run across a field, think about the precise verb that would show the way you see him running: The character could race, flee, stagger, stumble, reel, speed, jog, dart, scurry, or rush. Any of these verbs would give readers a much better idea than *run* would of just how your character is making his way across the field.



You can set your sentences in motion by showing people, objects, and events in motion. Even normally motionless objects can have life: doors can groan, TV sets can blare, statues can be hulking, and festivals can invite.

Specific, well-chosen verbs can help readers visualize your words without the need for an armful of adverbs. They're also a great way to energize your writing and make your readers say “Ah!” For example, instead of writing, “Judy drew back when the horse tried to bite her,” you could say, more vividly and more forcefully, “Judy flinched when the horse snapped at her fingers.”

## Adjectives

The right adjective can tell readers in a word what might otherwise take a paragraph to describe. They modify nouns, providing more information about them. An adjective tells readers if they should be picturing a russet-colored dog or a wolf-like dog or a purse-sized dog or a raincoat-wearing dog.

Exercise your adjectives. Think of five ordinary adjectives—for example: pretty, fat, happy, small, and red—and include each in a sentence. Then come up with five image-making synonyms for each, and see how much more vivid your sentences become.



When you edit your work, it's always a good idea to check for—and remove—unnecessary adjectives that overload your sentences or add only fluff, not meaning.

While adjectives add color and meaning, it's easy to get carried away and use too many of them. When you're composing your sentences, be sure to use only those adjectives that provide needed detail or nuance and pep up your language; if you use good, strong nouns, you will not need to modify each of them with an adjective.

## Adverbs

What adjectives do for nouns, adverbs do for verbs, as well as for adjectives and other adverbs. Adverbs clarify, telling how, when, where, and to what extent, giving readers valuable information for picture making.

Like adjectives, adverbs can be overused when writers rely on them for detail instead of using a strong verb. But when used sparingly, they can liven up sleepy sentences and layer meaning. For example, if you wrote, “It was precisely 8:30 when Aiko opened the door to the small man carrying a rain-soaked briefcase,” the adverb *precisely* makes *was* more interesting and more specific, and also adds a particular tone to the sentence: We think of the scene as being carefully arranged, and Aiko as a precise and measured person. If you wrote, “It was early morning when Aiko opened the door to the small man carrying a rain-soaked briefcase,” you would establish a different tone and set a slightly different scene. Precise, vivid wording makes all the difference in your writing.

## Unnecessary Words

It's easy to overwrite. We're so busy searching for that perfect word, that when we come up with one, we want to use it—and another and another. All of a sudden, every noun is clarified by an adjective; every verb has a trailing adverb. We describe things down to the tiniest detail—and wind up writing stories that overload readers with unnecessary verbiage. We pile on the similes and make sure every sentence contains a metaphor. If one descriptor is good, then two must be better.



"A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts."

—E. B. White and William Strunk, from *The Elements of Style*

When editing your work, remember the saying “less is more.” Using powerful language will eliminate the need to load up on the adjectives. And checking carefully to see that every word imparts some information, or is necessary to a phrase or description, will keep your writing moving. If you're describing a mountainous area as part of a travel article, saying that the rocks are light gray is unnecessary—many rocks are a grayish color, and readers know this without your telling them. If, on the other hand, the rocks are covered with pictographs, that's news and needs to be included.

Providing every detail also gives your readers less of a chance to use their imagination. If you write that a scruffy cat suddenly appears in a little boy's yard, readers can decide if it's a marmalade-colored cat or a skin-and-bones cat or a playful cat. With just the right amount of guidance, readers can make their own associations.



Flash fiction, screenplays, children's books, and poems are good models of tight writing because their formats put every word at a premium. Studying these works will help you whittle your words down to the bare essentials for telling the tale.

## Process of Elimination

To practice editing wordy text, try eliminating the unnecessary words in the following sentence:

*As the blood red dawn broke widely across the gray blue hills and the dark green lake, four men dressed in hip boots, tan vests, and heavy, large overcoats stood drinking small cups of steaming coffee as they waited for the noisy approaching boat.*

## Redundancy

Also watch out for redundant words and phrases. You don't need to write the "month of June;" readers know that June is a month. Likewise it's unnecessary to write "the bag was completely full;" *full* means *completely filled*, and adding *completely* is redundant. And never say "very unique." Unique is unique.

## Unclear, Unvaried, and Run-on Sentences

Compelling fiction and nonfiction are created one sentence at a time. That means you need to check each sentence for clarity and strength when you edit your work. Sentences can be informational, questioning, or commanding, but all need to have a subject and a predicate (except sentence fragments) and read smoothly, clearly, and engagingly. Fuzzy, same-sized, and marathon-length sentences prevent your writing from being its best. They also confuse and upset readers.



Simple sentences have one subject and one predicate. Compound sentences contain two or more independent clauses, often joined by a conjunction such as *but* or *and*. Complex sentences have one independent clause and one dependent, or incomplete, clause. Sentence fragments lack either a subject or a predicate.

## Unclear Sentences

"Jason said that many of his flowers wilted on Tuesday." Here is a prime example of an unclear sentence. It could mean just what it says, that Jason's flowers succumbed to a heat wave on Tuesday, or it could mean that Jason said on Tuesday that his flowers had wilted. Sentences should be constructed so readers have no doubt about the meaning (unless the ambiguity is intentional). The message in the example sentence would not be in doubt if the sentence were rewritten: "On Tuesday, Jason said his flowers had wilted."



Sometimes an author is too close to his or her material to see pronoun problems when revising. It's always a good idea to have an outside reader check to see if your references are clear. Reading sentences aloud will also help.

Muddy sentences also occur when the subject and predicate are too far apart. Here's an example: "When Nancy, who had just finished her aerobics class and was incredibly hot and thirsty and looking for a place to stop to rest, finally sat down, she dropped heavily into the chair." This sentence is much too long

and awkward, and as we read it we keep searching for the action—what did Nancy do? The structure is confusing and slows the reader down. Better to write, “After finishing her aerobics class, Nancy was incredibly hot and thirsty. She dropped heavily into a chair as soon as she found one.” Breaking the long sentence into two shorter ones helps enormously, but so does moving each predicate close to each subject.

Unclearly referenced pronouns also contribute to muddy sentences. In the sentence “Arlen told Eduardo that he needed to see a doctor,” it’s unclear *who* needs to see the doctor, Arlen or Eduardo. Meaning is made clear when a pronoun is placed close to its antecedent, but sometimes you will need to restructure or break up a confusing sentence. For example, the message in the example sentence would be clear if it were rewritten: “Arlen said to Eduardo, ‘I need to see the doctor,’” or “Arlen needed to see a doctor. He told this to Eduardo.”

## Unvaried Sentence Length

It’s possible to write a piece of fiction or nonfiction with sentences that are pretty much the same length. But that’s not a good idea. Consider this paragraph:

*Latoya was tired of waiting. She tapped her foot. She looked around. Millie was still not in sight. Latoya’s mouth turned down. She could feel her breathing quickening. Her heart beat fast.*

Monotonous, right? Varying sentence length will provide interest and also give your writing rhythm. A short sentence following several longer ones can emphasize a point. A longer sentence can provide a sense of flow, or enrich or extend an image. In dialogue, sentences of varied length make the conversation more real; you will probably want to include sentence fragments there, too, because people use them often in real life.



If you’re writing an informational piece, keep sentences on the shorter side. Many news writers restrict their sentences to twenty or fewer words, with only the occasional longer sentence cropping up.

Sentence length can do much to establish tone. If you’re writing a chase scene or developing inter-character tension or reporting news in the making, short sentences can deliver a sense of urgency. If you’re describing a country scene or want to establish a feeling of elegance or laziness, longer sentences can help convey a message of ease and tranquility. Often writers find that they have a

natural feel for how to vary their sentences, but you may find it necessary to work at mixing them up.

## **Run-on Sentences**

Just as it's easy to get carried away with adjectives and adverbs, it's also easy for writers to get carried away with an idea. Once you get going, it can be hard to stop. You describe and you point out and you show and you explain and all of a sudden your sentence takes up an entire page. And no one can understand it!

During editing, look carefully not only at the variety of your sentences but also at how long they are. If they roll on and on with nary a period in sight, some cutting or dividing needs to be done. Compound and complex sentences are great, but you don't want to wear readers out or bamboozle them. A sentence should be long enough to express one idea, and no more. You can achieve a pleasing flow and give readers a chance to catch your meaning by smoothly linking shorter sentences.

## **Within the Sentence**

In addition to varying sentence length, vary sentence function and form, too. Begin some sentences with the subject and some with an introductory phrase. Be sure every sentence doesn't start with "The." Mix compound and complex sentences with simple sentences. Make some sentences questions and some commands.

A good way to emphasize a point is to put the most important words at the end of the sentence. These are the words that will remain in the reader's mind. Similarly, it's effective to put the most important sentences at the end of a paragraph.



When writing action, stick to shorter sentences. Longer sentences can slow down the reader, which causes the action to lose suspense and momentum.

Also, to get across the core idea in a complex sentence, put the key words in the independent, or main, clause. Put the supporting details in the dependent, or incomplete, clause.

## Inconsistent or Inappropriate Tone

Tone can be tricky. It lets readers know the type of writing at hand—straightforward, humorous, angry, or scary. But not only must every word support the chosen tone, the tone itself must remain consistent in order to pull off the desired effect.

You can think of tone in writing in the same way you think of it in speech. For example, if you're telling a friend about the rude way someone treated you, every word you use and the way you string your words together is going to relay your unhappiness over the encounter. Plus, your entire diatribe is going to pour out in the same way—you're upset, and you stay upset for the length of your rant. If you start out emotionally, spitting out your words, and then continue by speaking calmly and softly, the impact of your words will be lost and your friend will be very confused.

It's the same way with writing. You choose a tone, and then you stick with it to make your intent clear. But sometimes tone can slip away from you, and what started out as a serious account is suddenly mocking or accusatory. If you're happy with the wording, you can miss the fact that the tone has changed and no longer suits the story. For example, it's not a good idea for a marketing piece, no matter how clever, to make fun of a product instead of touting it.



Read a press release or a letter to the editor. What is the overall tone? Once you determine it, read the piece again and pick out the specific words that put the tone across. Are they consistent?

You can check for tone consistency by checking your wording. Keep in mind the tone you intend as you review and revise. In fact, it's helpful to write down the intended tone and refer to it as you work. If your tone is meant to be funny, check to see that the words you used are light and sarcastic, not academic or cruel. Or if your intent is to persuade people to take up a cause, make sure your language is coaxing and encouraging throughout, not threatening or abusive. Precise wording is key to keeping tone consistent and reflecting the mood and emotional level you have in mind. It's also the way to convey your message to readers.

## Inappropriate Language

Once you know the tone of your piece, keep it consistent by editing out unsuitable wording. Inappropriate language comes in several varieties.

- If you're writing a book for young children, you need to use words that are appropriate to their understanding and their age. Stretching their vocabulary is great, but you don't want them to struggle so much that they give up in despair.
- If you're writing for a general audience but covering an esoteric subject, you need to make sure that the language you use has meaning for the reader, or else provide definitions for any jargon you include.
- You probably won't want to include slang if you're writing for an academic audience, while for a hip-hop crowd you'll write more casually.
- Whatever age or audience you're writing for, don't talk down to your readers or insult their intelligence. Always assume you're writing for bright, with-it readers—they're reading your material, after all!

For all forms of writing, beware of alienating your audience by using sexist, ageist, racist, or culturally offensive words. When you check your work for appropriateness, though, you don't need to call in the politically correctness police. Just use your common sense.



Sometimes words that have a perfectly innocent meaning in English have a not-so-innocent, or a downright offensive, meaning in another language. If you're writing a speech or preparing copy for other than native English speakers, check with experts for culturally inappropriate expressions.

## Excessive Use of Passive Voice

Which sentence is more powerful?

1. Basset hounds are little known by most people.
2. Most people don't know a thing about basset hounds.

Did you pick sentence #2? If you did, you know that framing your words in the active voice produces much more direct, vigorous writing.

A sentence in the active voice puts the subject in the power seat: "Portia entered the kitchen." A sentence using the passive voice makes the object of the verb the subject: "The kitchen was entered by Portia." The passive voice creates an indirect, weak construction, reducing punch and adding words. Subjects are acted upon instead of doing the acting, and readers generally find this dull or misleading. The passive voice can also slow down readers because they expect sentences to unfold in subject-follows-predicate order.

To engage your readers in what they're reading, and to make your writing



more emphatic, choose the active construction. Scour your sentences for passive wording that drags your writing down. The following sentences are written in the passive voice: “My son was laid low by the week-long heat wave” and “The snake was looked at by everyone as it made its slow way across the riverbank.”

Linking verbs such as forms of *be*, *appear*, *look*, or *seem* can often indicate passive wording.

- Sunny found himself blushing.
- There was a sudden hush that came over the party.
- A solitary backfire was heard.

Even sentences that show little action are best when couched in active terms. “Keiko focused on the coming day” is stronger than “The coming day was focused on by Keiko.” “Two spotted cows munched on the grass” is more compelling than “There were two spotted cows munching on the grass.” When you revise, refocus any sentences that you unintentionally wrote in the passive voice for action.

## **Exceptions to the Rule**

Is there ever a good reason to use the passive voice? There are occasions when the passive voice is useful. For one, the passive voice can put the focus on the object or person being acted upon, if that’s your intent. Using the passive voice, you can say, “The letter was written by Irena,” when the letter is what’s key. Or you can say, “Jerry was strangled with his dog’s leash,” cluing readers in to how Jerry was murdered—they already know that he’s dead.

You can also use the passive voice if you either don’t know or don’t want to say who is responsible for an action. For example, journalists who aren’t free to quote a source often say, “It has been reported that . . . .” If many people and many travel books tell you that the Tetons are a great vacation spot, you might say, “The Tetons are said to be . . . .” Such constructions get your message across, but they do it weakly, without punch.

## Chapter 17. Drafting

Okay, folks, this is it. This is where pen really meets page (or your fingers hit the keys). You've gotten the idea. You've planned it all out. You've done the research. You've organized your information and made an outline. Now you start to write.

### Getting Something onto the Page

Did your stomach just take a dive? Don't worry; you're not looking for perfection here. You just want to get the story down. The first draft is nothing more than the groundwork. It will serve you as the foundation of your final work, but it's not set in stone. Further revision is not only possible—it's essential.



Because the first draft is meant to be edited, it's a good idea to double-space your lines and leave wide margins on the page. Then, when you begin revising, you'll have plenty of room for notes, additions, and corrections.

### Jump In

Don't stop to agonize over the perfect word. Don't spend time worrying about style or spelling or punctuation. Don't get upset if you find you're not following your outline. Just write. Write as though you're telling a friend a story—you don't stop to correct your wording when you do that, right?

Tell your story as completely and as interestingly as you can, but concentrate only on giving yourself raw material to work with. It can be full of holes, bad grammar, and crazy ideas, but who cares? Unless you decide otherwise, no one is going to read it but you.

Remember, drafting is hard work! Many authors advise getting through it as quickly as possible, but remember to give yourself a few breaks. Get up and walk around. Stop for something to drink. Play with the dog. It will clear your head and renew your energy—not to mention stretch your muscles.

## Let Your Imagination Loose

Drafting is part of the creative process, so be creative! Write down anything that comes into your mind. Be open. Loosen up. You may think, “What possessed me to write that?” when you start editing, but all you have to do then is cross it out or delete it. And who knows? A crazy thought that comes out of the blue at this stage may turn out to be a smashing idea that sends your story in an exciting new direction. Many authors say that their first draft is almost nothing like the final version.

## Starting at the Beginning

An effective opening is a necessary ingredient of a winning piece of writing. Right off the bat, you want to capture your reader’s attention, set the tone and mood, and get the story moving. Your lead can be subtle or sensational, but it should definitely be significant.



Don't think of writing in terms of sitting down to write a screenplay or complete a 90,000-word novel—it will overwhelm you and you'll never get started. Think like Peter Robert Fleming, who said, “With the possible exception of the equator, everything begins somewhere.” Just start typing words, even if it's “I don't know what to write so I'm just typing.”

Take out your outline (aren’t you glad you made one?) and see how you thought the story might start. You can begin a story at any point—at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end—or at any spot that you think will carry the reader right into the story. Wherever you choose to start, it’s a good idea not to dawdle. You may have only a few paragraphs to pique readers’ interest, and though you don’t have to open with a hugely dramatic moment, you want to quickly give readers a sense of the engaging story to come.

## Write a Lead Sentence

If nothing comes to mind, keep thinking about your idea and let your imagination loose. Remember, it doesn’t have to be perfect, it only has to get you going. If nothing continues to come, try freewriting—write anything at all that comes into your head: description, dialogue, phrases, gibberish. Somewhere in the stream of words that pours out will be one that gives you an idea and gets the first sentence on the page. Then you have something to hook the next sentence to.

A compelling lead gives your work a strong start that:

- Grabs the reader's attention.
- Establishes the tone and the mood.
- Sets the conflict or main idea in motion.

As you get going, you'll discover that one idea leads to another, one word to another, and one sentence to another. It's a matter of connecting the bits and pieces, using your outline as a framework, and seeing what develops.

Here are some devices you can use to start your story:

- A piece of dialogue
- Showing a main character involved in some action
- Description of a character or setting
- A quotation
- A question
- An unusual fact
- A command or words directed to the reader
- A summary of the main idea
- An invitation
- A definition
- Historical background

For inspiration, here are a variety of intriguing openings:

"It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love." (from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* )

"The weather door of the smoking-room had been left open to the North Atlantic fog, as the big liner rolled and lifted, whistling to warn the fishing-fleet." (from Rudyard Kipling's *Captains Courageous* )

"They're out there." (from Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* )

"We were married in secret on September 22, 1981." (from Susanne Pari's *The Fortune Catcher* )

"What color is your diet?" That's one of the first questions I ask a patient." (from "The New Eat-by-Color Diet" by Dr. David Heber, in the June 2001 issue of *Self* magazine)

"Through the doorway that led to her receptionist-secretary's office into her own, Catherine Morris Perry instantly noticed the box on her desk." (from Tony Hillerman's *Talking God* )

“When I started my first company in Boston twenty years ago, I had little interest in business.” (from Paul Hawken’s *Growing a Business* )



“An action movie usually starts with a fast sequence, something to grab the audience’s attention away from their popcorn and soft drinks and propel them into the story. I’m not saying that all books should be written like Hollywood films, but there is merit in studying how they are constructed.”

—Chris Niles, mystery writer

“Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.” (from Anne Tyler’s *Back When We Were Grownups* )

“Harmony is driving home, eastward out of Las Vegas, her spirits high, her head a clutter of memories.” (from Larry McMurtry’s *The Desert Rose* )

“For forty years my act consisted of one joke. And then she died.” (from George Burns’s *Gracie: A Love Story* )

“Call me Ishmael.” (from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* )

“The Latin term *pro bono*, as most attorneys will attest, roughly translated means *for boneheads* and applies to work done without charge.” (from Sue Grafton’s *O’Is for Outlaw* )

“I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and none left to do the accounting.” (from “Death of a Pig,” in E. B. White’s *Essays of E. B. White*)

“‘I should feel sorrier,’ Raymond Horgan says. I wonder at first if he is talking about the eulogy he is going to deliver.” (from Scott Turow’s *Presumed Innocent* )

“For a long time, Molly Bonner’s strongest reaction to doctors was a fear that they would bore her to death.” (from Alice Adams’s *Medicine Men* )

“It was breakfast time and everyone was at the table. Father was eating his egg. Mother was eating her egg. Gloria was sitting in a high chair, and eating her egg too. Frances was eating bread and jam.” (from Russell Hoban’s *Bread and Jam for Frances* )

“Murderers do not usually give their victims notice.” (from P. D. James’s *A Certain Justice* )

## Traveling to the Middle

Great job: You’re under way! Now it’s time to tell your story—the story you’ve been wanting to write. The middle is where the main point is developed and the conflict or issues are brought to a head. Continue following your outline,

fleshing it out with character development, dialogue, description, information, and action. But remember, the outline is just a guide—be open to any new roads that look promising.

*It's like making a movie: All sorts of accidental things will happen after you've set up the camera. So you get lucky. Something will happen at the edge of the set and perhaps you start to go with that; you get some footage of that. You come into it accidentally. You set the story in motion, and as you're watching this thing begins, all these opportunities will show up.*

—Kurt Vonnegut, novelist

Start with the first scene or your first point and try to link it to your opening. If your opening set your travel article in San Diego, and your first stop is the San Diego Zoo, try to visualize the zoo (you made many notes when you were there, took photos, and talked to several visitors, keepers, and monkeys, so you've got lots of information to help you), and write about what was so wonderful about being there. Describe the place in vivid, image-making terms, but don't worry about perfection, just get the gist of it going. Then decide if this is a good time to include the funny conversation you had with a little boy who was spellbound by the giraffes. Try it. You can always move it—or delete it—later. If you've already described one of the baby animals cozied up with its parent, you could try moving into the conversation by describing how the boy came up to the giraffe area perched on his father's shoulders. If you get a good idea but it doesn't work just where you are, jot it down and see if it fits in later.



"A story is like a good party, the opening has much to do with how to get to the location where it's going on. You first need to know where it is, what part of town."

—Josip Novakovich, author and educator

Make connections between your points. Expand on the previous details. If you asked a question, the next step is probably to answer it. Think of all the possibilities. Brainstorm the best way to move ahead (flashing back can be a good way to take the story forward). Keep referring to your outline and think about your main idea. Read over what you've written every now and then (don't fix anything, just read) to aid transitions. Dramatize. Visualize.

Follow your instincts. Compare and contrast. Remember to show rather than tell. And keep going even if you don't know where to go. In fact, many authors advise that you keep going quickly, to get the whole story down in one sitting so you have it all to work with later. If nothing comes to mind in some spots, try coming at them from a different angle or just write gibberish until

something develops. You can always come back and fill in a missing piece. The idea now is to get the bulk of the work—rough though it may be—on paper. The time to make it pretty comes later.

*I write on yellow-lined legal pads. I write diagonally against the lines. . . . My first draft is formless, creative, unconfined by someone else's rules of how a line should look or where on the page the letters must be spaced.*

—Sophy Burnham, novelist

As you write, try to remember that you're building toward a climax and a conclusion. If you're writing fiction, you want conflict to increase. If you're writing nonfiction, you also want to aim toward resolving or exploring completely the issue you're discussing. Construct your piece with events or information that are engaging and that join together to advance and build the story.

## **Try It Yourself**

To practice filling in the middle of a story, try sketching out a middle for these beginning/ending combinations:

- Three women set out in a rowboat to do some early morning fishing. When they return, one is huddling in a blanket, her clothing soaked and her eyes blank.
- Two elderly neighbors haven't spoken in years. At the end of the story, they're having iced tea together in one of the men's backyards.
- A man is searching for ice cream in his freezer. Days later he wakes up in a field hundreds of miles from his house.

## **Reaching the End**

When a lot of authors start writing, they have no idea how their story is going to end—it becomes clear as the story takes shape. Other writers know only how their story will be resolved and they have to develop the beginning and middle in order to reach the end. (Mystery writer extraordinaire Agatha Christie was one of those. She always wrote the last chapter first so she would know “who done it.”) Whether you start with the end or end with it, the finale of your work should be a satisfying culmination of everything that has preceded it.

For the most part, and especially in fiction, the ending isn't a summary—it's a resolution. The conflict comes to a head and is then resolved in some way. All endings aren't happy. Many are very unhappy, and some leave it up to the reader to decide what the outcome really is—a step is taken, but it may or may not lead to happiness. But all strong endings are appropriate and fulfilling. And they're believable.

## What Makes a Well-Crafted Ending?

The well-crafted ending reflects or highlights the main point or problem that is noted at the beginning. In an article about the headaches of doing laundry on a long trip in a foreign country, you would conclude with how you solved the problem—or tried but failed. In a short story about robots that came to Earth by mistake, you might end with an ingenious way of returning them home, or a scene that solves their problem in one way or another (they might need to remain on Earth disguised as politicians until another robot comes for them). All situations that you've introduced during the course of the story need to be addressed at the end.



To practice writing endings, try picking a favorite book or a classic children's story and writing a new ending. For example, the glass slipper fits Cinderella's foot, but all the years of mistreatment at the hands of her family have made her afraid to trust the prince.

Like beginnings, endings can be subtle or sensational, but they need to be effective. They need to feel like an ending, bringing closure yet leaving the reader thinking about what he or she just read and learned. They also should be compact; sometimes it's hard to know exactly where to end, so you go on a little longer. Luckily, wandering endings can be dealt with when you revise.

Writers use several different methods to bring their stories to a close, including:

- **Simple resolution:** A little boy is lost and his dog leads rescuers to him.
- **Awareness or understanding:** A sister realizes that her brother's drug habit comes from a fear of being alone.
- **A surprise:** The best coffee in town can be found at Michael's Diner, not The Coffee Place.

Because the ending is the last thing the reader reads, you'll want to pay careful attention to the wording of the final few sentences and paragraphs.



Again, this is something that you can perfect when you revise, but keep in mind image and mood as well as the meaning you're trying to convey. Saying your closing sentences out loud can give you a sense of their impact.

## **Example of a Successful Ending**

Here's an example of an ending that resolves a problem, brings understanding, and does it with a surprise. In Elizabeth Berg's *Range of Motion*, Elaine's husband Jay has been in a coma, the result of a freak winter accident, for the length of the novel. After steadfastly refusing to consider he might never wake up, and painfully reminding herself of how great their life had been, Elaine begins to understand that she will have to go on without him. Then he wakes up. Here is the ending of the book, narrated by Elaine:

*Sometimes when I'm alone in the house I kind of ask for Evie [a ghost Elaine believes spoke to her while Jay was in the hospital] to come back . . . I want to tell her about the day Jay came home, what it was like when he opened the door to his house and walked back in. . . . There was just the slow lifting of his hand to the familiar banister at the foot of the stairs, the glint of the wedding ring that has never left his finger since the day I put it there. I want to say that I understood something at that moment, which was this: the gift is not that I got to bring Jay back. The gift is that I know what I brought him back to, and so does he. . . .*

## Chapter 18. Editing

Your first draft is finally done, but it's not yet time to relax and enjoy your work. The writing process is only halfway over. It's time for some serious rewriting. This chapter will get you on your way to a final draft that you had in mind.

### Rewriting Is Important

Editing your work can be fun, because here is where you take your raw material and turn it into an exciting, polished piece, the one that you've been envisioning and working toward. Editing gives you the opportunity to make all the changes needed to make your writing the best it can be.

Nonfiction author and screenwriter Murray Suid likens editing to checking yourself in the mirror before you leave the house. After you get dressed, you see how you look. Uh-oh, your shirt doesn't work with your pants. You choose another shirt. Is a button missing? You look for a new button and sew it on. Do you look washed out in the outfit? You try on a more colorful ensemble that suits you better. Would adding a little something pull it all together? You put on a necklace or add a power tie.

With editing, you search out all of your writing's imperfections. And if you've heeded many authors' advice, you'll find plenty of areas to work on because you weren't aiming for perfection in your first draft. Don't be intimidated. Think of editing as a kind of treasure hunt for problems where the prize is a big one—a greatly improved piece of writing.

### How to Start

The best way to start editing is . . . to do nothing. (See, this isn't so hard!) Most likely you've just spent a lot of time and energy getting that first draft down on paper, and you've done such a good job that you deserve a break. So take one. Put the article or poem or press release away for a while. You'll probably keep thinking about it, but try not to work on it. By stepping away for a bit, you'll come back to your piece with a fresh eye and the energy you need to revise. In fact, you may have promised yourself—and can now get—a big, revitalizing

reward for getting your first draft completed: lunch with a friend, a walk in the park or at the beach, a day without any household responsibilities. Give yourself—and your writing—a good rest.

## What to Look For

When you're ready to jump back in, it's a good idea to begin by reading your draft from start to finish. You may want to make notes or flag areas to work on, but try to look at the piece as a whole, rather than as sections or chapters or stanzas. Read slowly and think about your central idea and what you planned to say. Keep reminding yourself of your original intention. It's also a good idea to approach the piece as an uninvolved reader might, someone who isn't familiar with the material and will come to it looking to be informed or entertained in a clear, understandable, and engaging way.



"A friend of mine says the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. . . . The third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth."

—Anne Lamott, novelist and memoirist

After a thorough reading, some authors like to start their next draft from the beginning—a complete rewrite. They uncover a great deal of information through careful review and decide to deal with that information by starting over. Many authors, though, work from their draft section by section, improving the original material in more of a step-by-step fashion. Still others rework by concentrating on one element at a time; for example, description, grammar, plot or steps, characters, spelling, and so on. Whichever way feels most comfortable, during the revision process you should be looking for a number of things. It's often helpful to start with the larger, more general concerns and then work on the details.

## At the Macro Level

Think about your work by taking in “the big picture.” Read for:

- **Meaning:** Do you know what the novel/poem/article is about? Does it say what you want it to say?
- **Ideas:** Do they make sense? Are they logical? Do they support your meaning? Are facts identifiable as facts and opinions as opinions?
- **Clarity:** Are your points clear and focused? Could anything be

misunderstood? Are the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* readily apparent? Are your sentences so long that they're confusing?

- **Consistency:** Does the point of view remain the same throughout? Is the style consistent? Have you followed your organizational pattern; for example, are all the key points presented in chronological order? Are your characters always recognizable? Did you start writing in the present tense and then switch to the past?

- **Conciseness:** Have you used too many words when a few, more precise ones would make the work stronger? Do you cover the intended story and no more? Does the beginning actually begin the story, or do you have to read on a ways to get to the start? Does the ending continue on too long, adding nothing but extra words?

- **Completeness:** Have you given the reader everything she needs to know to understand the story? Did you tell it all, or has something been left out? Have you fleshed out areas that you only sketched in your first draft? Have you resolved the main problem or addressed the main point?

## At the Micro Level

Take a look at your writing with an eye to details. Pay attention to:

- **Wording:** Is your language vivid and imaginative? Is there a section that's boring? Is the dialogue realistic? Do you trip over a word or phrase? If you do, your reader will too. Is the wording precise? For example, would it give your reader a better idea about your character Phil if he snorts or giggles instead of just laughs? Do you show rather than tell? Do you employ rhetorical devices (see Chapter 15) to bring your characters and scenes and information to life? Have you used any sexist or other offensive language? Are there any clichés? Have you used a variety of words, or do you use *big* every time instead of *enormous*, *vast*, or *extensive* ?

- **Flow:** Does one paragraph lead smoothly and clearly to the next? Is the sequencing logical? Do you need additional bridge material? Is all the interesting stuff in the middle, making the end and the beginning seem tacked on? Does the conflict build? Does every sentence keep the story moving forward? For shorter works, it may help to read the piece out loud to see if you hear the music.

- **Mechanics:** Are all the words spelled correctly? Should *there* be *their* or *your* be *you're* ? Is your grammar solid? How about punctuation? Have you

capitalized all the proper nouns? Do your sentences run on? Do your paragraphs run on? Do you use quotation marks around quoted material and dialogue? Use your dictionary and a style guide such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* for help—the spell checker can only do so much. If you’re not confident of your skills here, you can have a professional copy editor or proofreader give your final draft a once-over.

## Do a Character Check

Check to see that your characters act in a consistent way. This is especially important in lengthier writing, such as a novel or a screenplay. If you decide a character doesn’t like dogs, then that character needs to shy away from any dog that trots through your story. If another character is portrayed as supremely moral for three-quarters of the novel, she can’t run off with the milkman for a shocking ending (unless some major event has completely transformed her lifelong way of thinking).

In one novel (which will not be named here), a male character has a sudden affair with his new stepmother-in-law after showing nothing but animosity toward her for nearly the entire book. There were no signs leading up to his change toward her; it just suddenly happened, and it made no sense. It was a plot device that changed the course of the story, but it wasn’t true to either character. That’s a surefire way to turn off your readers!



“I begin with . . . the main characters and draw a line from the beginning to the end of the screenplay to see what has occurred with each. . . . Once you see the progression, you can pinch here and tuck there.”

—Christopher Keane, screenwriter and teacher

To review, characters should be:

- Believable
- Intriguing
- Out of the ordinary
- Consistent
- Not stereotypes
- Not overdone
- Three-dimensional

## Make Your Changes

A careful reading of your material has probably produced a number of areas that can use some work. This is a good thing! Now, using the notes you made, start revising. Keep thinking like a reader, making changes that will provide even more clarity, appeal, and punch. Shorten. Expand. Add detail.

Find the precise word. Reroute the plot. Correct the spelling. Use a different organizational pattern. Don't be afraid to change things; trust yourself when you decide that your story really should be told by Nate rather than Matt. Often, a second draft is almost nothing like the first draft. Be fearless. Be creative.

## **Be Ruthless**

A big problem for many writers is that they fall in love with a certain sentence or paragraph or character or format, and during editing realize that it just doesn't work for the story. But they can't bring themselves to cross it out. It's too perfect. It took so long to craft.



If you make major changes during editing or begin again, be certain to save all your original work. Just because you're not using it now doesn't mean you won't use all or some of it later on. Words, phrases, or ideas may come in handy at another time. Save everything!

Sorry, but you've got to start deleting. As wonderful as it might be, if it doesn't work with the story, it simply can't be there. Summon up your courage. Besides, you don't have to throw those words in the trash. Save them for another article or story; if they're that important to you, you might even build a story around them. And until you get to that next project, why not pin the lines up where you can see them? They'll remind you of how creative and excellent a writer you can be.

## **Now, Do It Again**

At this point, you've improved your writing enormously. Reward yourself with another break. Then, read the material again, still thinking like a new-to-it reader, still looking for "treasure" at both the macro and micro levels. Most likely, you'll come up with several issues you feel still aren't quite right. Note them, think about how to resolve them, and work on them. And keep on reading and revising until you're satisfied that what you've created is the best it can be. This can take a while, so try not to be discouraged: it's said that author Raymond Carver revised his drafts twenty to thirty times and that Dylan Thomas rewrote

one of his poems seventy-one times.



When asked if he did a lot of rewriting, Ernest Hemingway said, "It depends. I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied."

Which brings up one more point: seventy-one revisions may have been right for Dylan Thomas, but four may be right for you. It is possible to get so caught up in revising that you forget you need to stop at some point and say it's finished. Edit until you're happy with what you've done and until you think you've made real the vision you started out with. Then save your work, print it out, and turn off the computer.

## Chapter 19. Evaluating

Well, you did it. You came up with a great idea, you developed it, and you polished it. You created a written work that expresses your ideas and your feelings in a way that only you could do. You saw it through, even when you thought you couldn't. So, what's the next step?

### Assess Your Achievement

You're probably thinking, "What else could there be to do?" You've completed your project. You've successfully written your memoir or travel article or poem. But there is another step.

Whether or not you decide to have your work published, it's a good idea to get some feedback. Having your work evaluated—by yourself and others—may seem an unnecessary part of the writing process. On the contrary, investing time in this step will reward you with valuable insights, encouragement, and direction.

### Send Your Baby out into the World

Now that your work is more or less polished, you should be ready for another pair of eyes to read your story. Seeking the comments of a caring, impartial critic whose opinion you respect can help to improve it.

Choose one person or a few people whose opinion you respect and who will be honest or choose a professional editor who will be completely objective. Ask for feedback. This can be scary—someone is going to be assessing your darling—but try to remember that it will add to your knowledge and, if it can improve your writing, then it's a good thing.



It can hurt—deeply—when someone finds fault with your writing. But the purpose of getting feedback is to help you produce the best work possible. A momentary pain can lead to a long-lasting feeling of achievement.

When receiving feedback, it's crucial to remember that your *work*—and not your personality or self—is being evaluated. It's also important not to get



defensive; you won't hear the criticism that's being offered if you're always defending your work, and that means you can't benefit from it. If you've chosen the right people to ask for comments, the criticism you hear will be intended to help, not hurt.

And while you should certainly take the reviewers' comments seriously, keep in mind that you don't have to act on the feedback you get if you don't agree with it. This is still your work, and your opinion is the key one. However, if you have several readers review your work and they all say there's a problem with the plot or that a flashback is confusing or that your argument just doesn't prove your thesis, then you should probably take their criticism to heart.



Screenwriters have a special way of getting feedback. Because screenplays are meant to be read by actors, screenwriters organize a group of friends or colleagues to read the different parts aloud at a table reading. Such a "performance" is critical to polishing a script.

If you want, you can ask your reviewers to check out the kinds of things you looked for when you were editing: spelling, flow, typos, and grammar. Mostly, you want to know their answers to the big-picture questions. Jotting down these questions ahead of time will help you get answers to the main issues you're interested in. For example:

- Does the story make sense?
- Is the message they got the one you intended?
- Did the sequencing make sense?
- Did they learn something or enjoy the story? Was it interesting? Believable?
- Are there any weak spots?
- Is the writing clear?
- Is it ready to send to a publisher or to be self-published?

If you have particular concerns, it's probably a good idea to write them down or discuss them so your reader can be on the lookout for them. Specific questions might look something like these:

- Does the metaphor on page 6 sound overly dramatic?
- Does the character Seth sound believable in the dialogue on page 35?
- Does the car accident on page 40 work as an effective and sufficiently dramatic plot point?

You can put together an informal questionnaire to guide readers in their

review, or get together to discuss their thoughts after they've completed the reading. The more specific you are, the better your reader will understand what you're looking for. In addition to reading a story, some reviewers enjoy assessing a piece of writing by hearing it read aloud. Hearing the words can add to reviewers' overall sense of the piece and better enable them to assess its rhythm, tone, and clarity.

Ask anyone who reviews your work for as much information as he can give you: reactions, concerns, general and specific suggestions, strengths and weaknesses, what could use some work, and what they enjoyed (positive feedback is valuable, too!). Assure your reader that you're looking for explicit comments, both pro and con, and not to be afraid to be honest. Learning about weak spots will enable you to improve them.

What should I do if I agree with a negative evaluation?



Use what you find out to revise, or put the work away and start in on something new. Just don't beat yourself up; everything you learn will increase your chances for success the next time around.

Once you have these answers, sit down and really study them. Try not to get defensive, but rather concentrate on deciding if they'll improve your work. If they will, turn the computer back on and start revising. If you truly feel they won't, put them away and stay with your final version.

## Look Back in Order to Look Ahead

In addition to evaluating the written work you've created and having others review it, it's also helpful if you sit back and evaluate the entire process you've just been through. You've put time, energy, imagination, and emotion into a deeply involving and possibly brand-new experience, and giving yourself a chance to think about it can tell you a lot.

You can evaluate your experience in several ways. One is to think about the writing process.

- Did you enjoy it? Are you looking forward to doing it again?
- Would you follow the exact same route for your next project? Would you spend more time in some areas, like research for example?
- Would you be sure you had the ending to your mystery firmly in your mind before you started writing another one?
- Would you make a detailed outline by grouping together index cards, instead of just making sketchy notes?

- Did the project make you realize you need to brush up on your grammar and punctuation skills?
- Was interviewing people surprisingly enjoyable?
- Would you be able to exercise your writing muscles more by writing for a young-adult rather than an early-reader audience?
- What were the best parts of the process? The hardest?
- What would you never do again during the development of other stories?

Another thing to think about is genre.

- Are you happy with the type of work you produced?
- Is the poem you penned wonderfully satisfying, even though its core idea could have been explored more fully in a short story?
- Do you feel you've gotten to understand the way a strong memoir is put together, and are you now ready to try something completely different, say, a screenplay?
- Did doing all that exciting research interest you in writing a nonfiction article next rather than another fiction piece?

## **What Are Your Goals?**

The goal for many authors is to complete a piece of writing, one that expresses something important to them and does it in a satisfying way. They write for themselves, not an audience. They may share their work with a writers' group or with close friends or family members, but basically they write to fulfill a personal need.

Other authors write with the goal of having their work published. They create works of fiction or nonfiction from a deep desire to do so, but they believe that the final step of the writing process is to share their words with others, and that these words don't reach their full potential until they are out in the world.

## **Consider Publishing**

Reflect on the following questions:

- Have you written your piece to satisfy a personal need or interest, and are you content just knowing that you completed it?

- Or, after thinking about all the creative effort you put into it, and your excellent results, do you think you want to share your thoughts and words with others?
- If you do want to publish, are you ready to begin the process of looking for a publisher or self-publishing your work?
- If you're going to self-publish, do you need to learn about page design, typesetting, and marketing?

If you decide you want to publish your work, be sure your manuscript is in top-notch shape. That means neatly typed, double-spaced, no typos or spelling or punctuation mistakes, no coffee stains, and numbered pages. Make a backup copy and keep it in a safe place.

If you think it might be difficult to hire an agent or find a publisher, or you'd rather keep complete control of your work rather than put it into the hands of someone who may not do everything to your liking, self-publishing may be your route to a wide audience. Self-publishing, or independent publishing, keeps the author in the driver's seat. When you publish your own work, you decide on the design, the content, the art, the cover, the paper, the size, the amount of money that goes into it. You also keep all the money from sales, rather than just the royalties. And, just as importantly, all rights to the book belong to you.



Self-publishing is not the same thing as vanity press publishing. A vanity press will charge you to publish your book, an unnecessary expense now that technology has made it so much easier and less costly to publish your own work.

The down side? While you keep all the money the book brings in, you also pay all the expenses for producing it. And, just as important, self-publishing takes an enormous amount of work. Independent publisher Ken Rudin thinks of independent publishing as a cottage industry—nearly a full-time business. Self-publishers are in charge of everything: the design, editing, proofreading, layout, artwork, printing, binding, warehousing, distribution, advertising, and promotion of their book.

## Moving Forward

By reflecting on all the aspects of the writing process, you'll learn a lot about what you've experienced and also about what you want to do next. Because, very likely, you're going to want to do this again. Maybe not in the exact same way, and maybe not in the same genre, but I'm willing to bet that now that

you've successfully completed a creative work, the urge to keep writing is not going to go away.



Some authors evaluate again after their work has been published, and then revise their story. Author Tim O'Brien revised his published short story "Ghost Soldiers" into a chapter in a later work, *The Things They Carried*. He realized that the story could work in a different way, and changed it.

So think about the process you've been through, and use what you've learned to move ahead. Looking back and evaluating will help prevent you from repeating missteps, guide you to new and more enjoyable ways of working, and strengthen your writing skills. And most importantly, you'll gain the confidence to go forward—just look at what you've accomplished!

## Chapter 20. Overcoming Writer's Block

As with anything important you work at—your nine-to-five job, sports, parenting, relationships, caring for your garden and your home—you're going to have good writing days and bad writing days. This chapter will help you deal with the bad days each writer faces sooner or later.

### When Your Creative Juices Aren't Flowing

Some days there will be so many ideas bubbling in your brain that it will be all you can do to make it to your writing time and get them down on paper. The words will pour out like French champagne into crystal. You'll be humming and smiling—creative writing is the best!

On other days, it won't be as easy. Still, the energy is there, and though you sigh a bit and pace a bit, the words come. You get something good down, or maybe you spend time revising and are pleased with the pages you put a shine on. You're productive and you're satisfied. This writing life is okay.



"In the creative state a man is taken out of himself. He lets down as it were a bucket into his subconscious, and draws up something which is beyond his reach. He mixes this thing with his normal experiences, and out of the mixture he makes a work of art."

—E. M. Forster

But sooner or later a day arrives when nothing comes, and you find yourself sitting there staring at your fingers, wondering what you've done wrong or thinking you really should be cleaning the litter box. The blank computer screen waits expectantly, but you have nothing to tell it. Not a word. Or a horrible word that you immediately erase.

It's writer's block, and it's got you in its grasp. It can last a short time or be interminable; some writers never recover from it, and give up and find a new activity. But that's not going to happen to you. Almost all authors have at some time gone through a period of being blocked, and most have found techniques that let them break through the wall.

### Causes of Writer's Block

Whenever you get stuck, try to determine what's really blocking you. The causes

might be emotional, physical, or literary. Once you diagnose the problem, you can figure out how to overcome it.

## **Fear of Failure**

Just about every writer suffers at some point from a bad case of nerves. I'm not good enough, you think. I can't possibly do this well. Who am I to think I have anything important to say? Even while you're loving what you're doing, and occasionally seem to put a few decent words together, you're certain that you can't possibly measure up to your own or to others' expectations. You think, why bother to write anything when it will never make the grade?

## **Fear of Success**

The flip side of fear of failure is fear of success. Things are rolling along, and you're feeling pretty good about your writing. But what happens when you finish your play or your poem? You're going to have to send it out into the world and editors and readers might enjoy it! Then you'll have to write something else. There will be new decisions to make, new commitments, and new challenges to face. If your work does very well, you might even have to give an interview or speak in front of an audience. It all makes you wonder if you shouldn't just stop right now and avoid all those new problems.

## **Lack of Concentration**

The dog just threw up. You have to leave in twenty minutes to take your kid to the orthodontist. Your mother-in-law is arriving this weekend for an indeterminate stay. Your boss has been looking at you funny for a few weeks. Another of your tech stocks just tanked. You have a big exam coming up. The world is too much in your head, but you promised yourself you were going to write every day. So you close the door and sit down...and can't think of a word to write.



"Sometimes . . . agony visits the head of a writer. At these moments, I stop writing and relax with a coffee at my favorite restaurant, knowing that words can be changed, rethought, fiddled with, and, of course, ultimately denied."

—Steve Martin, author and comedian

## **Lack of Energy**

Like all the things that can distract you, feeling less than your best can contribute to writer's block. Maybe you're coming down with the flu, or you've just gotten over a cold. Maybe you're worried about . . . well, any number of things, and you were up all night. Maybe it's crunch time at school or the office, and you've been putting in many more hours than usual. You hurt your knee skiing. You're depressed about losing out on a promotion, or shaken from a run-in with a driver with road rage. You've been revising your article all day and still aren't satisfied. Just about any physical or mental stressor can block the creative flow, for a few hours or much longer.

## **Lack of Down Time**

Everything's been going well. You came up with a great idea, you did your research, and you wrote a rough but decent first draft. Then, without taking a break, you jumped right in to start shaping and polishing, and you're stumped. You can't imagine where all your excitement went, all your energy. You begin to doubt everything you've done. What in the world were you thinking?

## **Lack of Material**

The idea came so easily, and you know it's a topic that will appeal to a broad range of readers. You were pretty familiar with the subject, so you didn't spend much time on research. Now it seems the idea wasn't so great after all; there's really not much to write about. You've sketched out a couple of pages, but nothing more comes.



To help prevent writer's block, end each day's writing in the middle of something that's working well. When you start up again, you can continue with that section and have its momentum keep you rolling. If you complete a section, make yourself a note about what comes next.

## **A Problem with the Story**

You know where you're going but you can't seem to get there. The conflict isn't developing properly. Your character seems one-dimensional. The drama just isn't there. When you first came up with the idea, you saw the story very clearly. There really wasn't a need to do any planning or make an outline, because it was



obvious what should happen. Now that you're in it, though, you can't make anything work. The whole project has bogged down.

## **You're Trying to Fix the Wrong Problem**

You can't understand it. You developed your story point by point, and now you can't write the ending. Everything should have led up to a dynamite conclusion, but you're stymied. Is it possible you took a wrong step earlier? No, it's just that you're tired or having a bad day, isn't it?

## **Dealing with the Problem**

The first thing to remember when coping with writer's block is to not make yourself crazy. The second thing is to trust that this is not a permanent condition. Something is going to get you writing again—unless deep down you have decided that you never want to write again.

What should I do if the story doesn't interest me anymore?



Unless it's an assignment with a deadline, set it aside for a while so you can revisit it down the road. Work on something else for a day, a month, or even a year. If the topic no longer excites you, there's no passion to drive you.

When you first realize that every word count is producing the same number, don't panic. It may be just a short-lived thing, and getting up and stretching or getting something cold to drink will get you back in the groove. But if you've done ten sets of exercises and drunk ten glasses of water without effect, it may be time for some stronger measures.

## **If You Are Stuck**

Reread from the start and find the last paragraph that you think is a good one. Start again there (don't delete everything from that point forward, just move it out of the way; you may want to rework it at a later point). Build your story by hooking on to something promising.

*Unlike many people, I have no fear of writing, I have a facility for putting words on paper. Not writing scares me more! But if I find myself stuck on a project, I jump to something else. I always have several activities going at once. Also, the*

*thesaurus is one of my favorite tools. I'll write something simply, and then jazz it up in a later draft.*

*—Annalisa McMorrow, business writer and novelist*

Or try adding a new scene, a new character, a new point. If you're stuck on what you've got, creating a new element may be the way to get the whole thing rolling again. The energy of the new feature may send your work in a different direction, and carry you along with it.

Take a whole new tack with the project. Change voice, point of view, tense, even genre. Or narrow or widen the focus. Maybe the idea is right but the approach is wrong. Experiment and see what works.



When author Tom Wolfe tried to write a magazine article about custom cars, he was blocked. The editor suggested Wolfe type up his notes for someone else to write. While typing, "something [began] to happen," and his notes turned into a forty-nine-page story that became *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamlined Baby*.

If none of these strategies work, show your work to an outside reader. Explain that you're bogged down, and ask for help in pinpointing the problem. Is the story making sense? Is it interesting? What can be done to add drama? What would be a logical next step? Brainstorm possibilities. Even if you don't think any of the suggestions are helpful, just talking about the piece may make it more real in your mind and you'll come up with an idea that breaks the block. Remember, you don't have to go this alone.

## **If You Lost the Energy**

Take a major break. Shut off the computer, or put your pen back in the drawer. Get up and walk away—for the rest of the day, for a few days, or even longer. Try taking a complete vacation from what you're working on. You may be so wrapped up in it, or so tired from all the hours you've put into it, that you're simply overloaded. Giving yourself a rest, and coming back fresh, may be all that's needed to restart your engine.

If you are reluctant to take a break, at least take a break from writing and instead work on another part of the project. Edit what you've written so far or look up additional material; lack of enough to work with may be holding you back. Or go out and do the interview you've been putting off. You'll be giving yourself a break from word production, but still moving ahead.

## If You Are Stressed

If you are pressed for time, try to concentrate on how much you've already accomplished. Reread what you've got so far, and congratulate yourself on how far you've come. If you've come this far, you can go farther.

A big project can easily overwhelm a writer. Break up your work into sections. If you're writing a 5,000-word short story, work on the project in 1,000-word increments. The thought of having to write 1,000 words is less intimidating than having to write 5,000 words.

Take care of any nonwriting-related problems that may be bothering you. If you're worried about a presentation at work, don't try to write until you've made it. If you need to do your taxes by next Friday, sit down with the forms now. Anything that's putting pressure on you can put a halt to the creative flow.

Maybe the lack of deadlines stresses you out. Go ahead and assign yourself a deadline. Tell yourself that you have to finish the piece in three days, or whatever seems reasonable. The pressure of a deadline worked in high school and college—maybe it will work again now.

Doctors recommend exercise to relieve stress, so if you are stressed about writing, get up from your desk and head for the gym or the park. At least a half hour of walking, running, jumping rope, swimming, or whatever you like to do will do you good. Exercise can relieve pent-up anxiety, plus it may tire you out enough to get a good night's sleep revive you for a better day's work tomorrow.

## A Change of Scenery

Move your writing location, time, or tools. Most of the time you may need to be in your comfortable chair at your familiar computer with dog at your feet to write well. But shaking up your routine may wake up your creativity. If you always write in the kitchen, try the living room. If you always write from six to eight in the morning, experiment with creating later in the day. Take your laptop or a notebook to the local coffee place. Move outdoors, or to the library or a bookstore. If you always work at the computer, see what writing longhand produces.



Give yourself some visual stimuli. Look at photographs, artwork, magazines, or gardens. The colors, textures, and subject matter may be just what's needed to unlock your artistic gates.

If the new scenery can't fire up your creativity, maybe a new project will,

so start all over. I know this sounds awful, but if you try a number of fixes and nothing seems to help, maybe the problem is that the piece is simply unworkable. It happens. But don't look at it as the end of the world. Put the work away, and start looking for a new idea. Comfort yourself by remembering that the time wasn't wasted. Everything you write, even stories that you never complete, adds to your knowledge and exercises your imagination.

## Additional Strategies

If nothing else works, try the following strategies. Who knows what might work!

- **Write for ten minutes.** Even if you can't think of a thing to say, set the timer for ten minutes and write something until the bell rings. Just writing "blah, blah, blah" over and over may put your mind back in writing mode.
- **Eat.** Your lack of imagination may be the result of a lack of food. Engines can't run without burning gas; you can't run without breakfast, lunch, and dinner.
- **Decide on a way to reward yourself when you complete the project.** If the treat is good enough, it will serve as an incentive to get back in gear.
- **If you're writing for pay, remind yourself that if you don't finish, you won't get that check.** And you won't get another assignment. A glance at your bill pile couldn't hurt either.
- **Read some writing that really excites you.** Reminding yourself how the greats do it may help you to uncover the problems in your own work that are holding you back.
- **Talk to other writers.** Ask how they solve the problem or for any techniques they know about it. Even if something didn't work for them, it might help you.

Be patient. If one start-up technique doesn't work, give yourself a break and then try something different. If you get a few sentences down and then have more trouble, don't force yourself to keep going, just try again tomorrow. It may take a little while, but keep telling yourself you'll eventually get back to writing. And you will.



Make it a point to learn new words. Words are the ingredients of the dishes you serve up, and the wider your vocabulary, the more scrumptious your meals will be. Read widely. Look up words you don't know in the dictionary. Play word games and solve word puzzles.

Sometimes it can take much longer than a few hours or a few days before you're ready to start back in on a piece that's been blocking you. Some authors have set aside work for years before they found the inspiration to complete it.

## Chapter 21. Working with Others

Writing can be a lonely occupation. Idea generating and research may take you out into the world, but most of the time it will be just you and your computer. It's important to leave your corner from time to time for the assistance and the camaraderie of other writers.

### Collaboration

Playwright and author Moss Hart saw collaboration between writers as a “protest against the unalterable fate of being alone.” If you're working on a small project, this may not be practical. But for something larger, especially a piece of writing that involves a good deal of research, it may benefit you to seek out another writer to work with.



Collaboration enables writers to pool talents and to share resources, skills, and legwork. It also doubles (or triples) time available for a project and provides an immediate source of feedback and evaluation.

If you collaborate, there are two (or more) heads to address problems and come up with solutions. If you're thinking of ditching for the day, you're more likely to decide to do your share. And by collaborating, there's always someone to complain to, laugh and celebrate with, and count on who understands your work inside and out. With a writing partner, you're not alone.

Writers can collaborate in many different ways. Some work together crafting each sentence. Some evenly distribute the responsibilities: One does the research; one does the writing. Or both take part in every phase but work on separate chapters or scenes. Sometimes writers will brainstorm ideas, and then one will write a first draft for the other to revise and refine. Whichever route you choose, try to use each person's talents in the best way possible and find a system that makes you both happy.

Working together can lighten the load and enrich the writing experience, but trying to collaborate with four or more writers can become unwieldy. It's more likely you'll have a successful “marriage” as a twosome or, at the most, a threesome.

If you've never collaborated before, it may take some getting used to. It

will definitely help if the writers have compatible personalities and work habits, and complement each other's skills. It's also important that you respect each other and listen to each other. Before you get under way, set aside some time to map out how the process will work. You can always make changes as needed, but setting up a system can help you determine and agree on your goals.

Here are some issues to take care of first:

- Make a list of all the work involved, and then divvy it up. Include such jobs as library and online research, interviews, word processing, editing, proofreading, keeping track of costs/budgeting, safeguarding notes and other materials, and submitting work to potential publishers.
- Decide how you will share any profits and expenses.
- Decide how you will settle the inevitable disagreements—find a middle ground or agree not to go forward with something unless both partners are happy with it—and more important, how you'll work to prevent serious problems—with respect, fairness, honesty, and humor.
- Decide when and where you'll work (collaboration can be done over the Internet, but it's generally better to meet face-to-face).
- Determine if you want a written rather than a verbal agreement that covers all aspects of the collaboration.
- Work out a deadline schedule.
- Decide whether you'll write under both of your names or come up with a different one.

Collaborating with another writer can be a great way to learn and improve your skills. Remember, though, that it is also a way to lessen isolation and pressure and share your love of writing. Make time to talk about writing and other interests as well as about your project. Take your work to a café or go out to lunch together. Work hard, but work on encouraging and supporting each other, too.



"When one is at a low point . . . the very presence in the room of another human being, even though he too may be sunk in the same state of gloom, very often gives that dash of valor to the spirit that allows confidence to return and work to resume."

—Moss Hart, playwright

## Winning Teams

The following list includes novelists, screenplay writers, and songwriters who succeeded through collaboration. Some, like Charles Dickens, are writers in their

own right, while others have established lengthy collaborative efforts that span their writing careers.

- Wilkie Collins, the nineteenth-century author of *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*, and renowned writer Charles Dickens, author of *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*. Literary collaborators and traveling companions, they penned *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*.
- Julius Epstein and Philip Epstein. Twin brothers, the Epsteins worked together on the screenplays of several movie classics, including *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Casablanca*.
- Edith Anna Oenone Somerville, a nineteenth-century Irish author, artist, and suffragist, and Violet Florence Martin, Somerville's cousin who wrote under the pseudonym Martin Ross. Together the women collaborated on a series of humorous novels about the rural Irish gentry. Their most important literary achievements were *The Real Charlotte*, in which the two main characters are cousins, and *Some Experiences of an Irish R. M.*, which was adapted for television in 1983.
- Edmond-Louis-Antoine Huot de Goncourt and Jules-Alfred Huot de Goncourt. Known as *les deux Goncourt*, these French brothers authored a number of well-known novels of the naturalist school, including *Mme. Gervaisais* and *Soeur Philomène*, and a study entitled *The Woman of the Eighteenth Century*. After Jules's death, Edmond continued writing under both names because he felt that he and Jules were still communicating.
- Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall cowrote *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Nordhoff met Hall in 1916, and the two soon wrote a book about their World War I flying unit, the Lafayette Flying Corps. When they received an advance from *Harper's* to write travel articles, they moved to Tahiti, where they coauthored three very successful novels about the H.M.S. *Bounty*. They later collaborated on six other books.



Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall, who cowrote *Mutiny on the Bounty*, used both names but needed to determine which would come first. They decided on "Nordhoff and Hall" because Hall thought it was more effective to end a sentence or anything else with a "short, crisp word."

- Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee. Using the name Ellery Queen, these cousins cowrote a large number of popular mysteries, including *The Hollywood Murders* and *The Tragedy of Errors and Others*. They also developed the idea for *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, which Dannay edited from 1941 to 1982.



- Lowell Ganz, Babaloo Mandel, and Bruce Jay Friedman. A dynamic collaborative team, these writers developed the screenplay for *Splash*, the highly successful 1984 comedy about a mermaid who falls in love with a New Yorker starring Tom Hanks and Daryl Hannah.
- Moss Hart and George Kaufman. A prolific and critically acclaimed writing duo, Hart and Kaufman wrote six plays together, including *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and *You Can't Take It with You*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1937.
- John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Known the world over, this extraordinary half of the Beatles wrote some of the most well-loved and revolutionary songs of the twentieth century, including “Norwegian Wood.” A friend of theirs, Hunter Davis, remarked that “Now and again, they’d write whole songs individually, but mostly one of them had half a song and the other one would finish it off.”



Bestselling collaborators Val Corbett and Joyce Hopkirk, who write as Val Hopkirk and have coauthored six novels, say they’ve learned to criticize each other’s ideas constructively. If they disagree, they don’t make vomiting sounds; instead, they say, “Yeess, that’s one way forward but . . . what about if we . . .”

## Joining a Writers’ Group

Having another writer provide feedback on your work is an important first step in putting that work in front of an audience. It also gives you access to the assistance and fellowship of another author. To expand your audience, as well as to learn from and enjoy the company of other wordsmiths, you may want to consider joining a writers’ group. Many authors, from those whose books climb the bestseller lists to those just starting out, find the tips, constructive criticism, brainstorming possibilities, contacts, friendships, and encouragement available in writing groups to be essential to their writing process.



Hosting guest speakers at your writers’ group can be a great way to learn and network. Consider inviting a literary agent, published author or tax preparer to share advice and possibly pick up new clients or readers.

To make the experience enjoyable as well as valuable, look for a group that will meet your needs. If you write in a specific genre, hooking up with a group of similarly directed authors is probably best. If you’re primarily interested in getting and giving feedback, you may want to join a group that spends all of its meeting time critiquing work. If you’re also looking for a social element or want

to learn about publishing or the business end of writing, a group that invites speakers or holds an after-meeting social time may be more to your liking. There are also accountability groups, which don't necessarily critique work but rather hold you to your writing timelines and goals. Some writing groups also meet to spend their time writing, often with fun, impromptu exercises to spark your creative side.

Think about what you want out of a group before you start interviewing.

That's right—interviewing. Unless you start your own group, which you certainly can do, any group you contact will most likely ask you to show them samples of your work and attend a meeting. This will benefit both parties. The writers in the club will be able to assess the level of your writing and also see the kind of criticism and experience you'd contribute.



When interviewing writers' groups, look for peers who are knowledgeable, kind, honest, and who love language. Be sure you'll enjoy spending time with the members and that they'll offer both support and useful information.

By interviewing, you'll have the opportunity to determine if you'll be comfortable in the group and with the level of the members' writing and expertise. You'll also get a chance to see the kind of help they might offer. Aim to join a group whose writing is more advanced than your own. In that way you'll learn the most, and be inspired to reach a higher level.

## A Group of Critics

All writers' groups don't function in the same way. In some, every member brings something to read or discuss—a chapter, an outline, an idea, a completed article or story, a troublesome paragraph. In others, the group focuses on a different member's material or questions each time they meet. Some groups meet weekly, some monthly, some when a member needs help. But all groups meet to support members and to provide a critical ear that will help improve their work.

Just as you would ask one outside reader for specific comments, do the same with the group. Explain exactly what you want help with, or the information you need. Read your material aloud clearly; you may also want to hand out copies of the work for the members to follow. Listen carefully to all comments, and try not to be upset by negative feedback. Focus on the work.

If you continually leave meetings feeling beaten up and depressed, you're probably in the wrong group. Negative feedback can be helpful if it's presented carefully and constructively. But if members trash your work and don't offer helpful advice, look for a new group with a more positive approach.



When it's your turn to critique another member's writing, put yourself in her shoes. Criticize the work, not the writer. Give your full attention to the material. Make notes if that will help you convey your thoughts. And keep in mind that your role is to help improve the material. If you have something negative to say, begin with something positive. Relay the criticism as gently as you can while still making the point. Mention both strengths and weaknesses. And try to offer suggestions for improvement when you find flaws. "This section confused me" doesn't help the author. "This section confused me; I think I would understand it better if you add a flashback that reveals why Irene would act this way" offers useful information.

## **Finding a Group**

If you think you might benefit from joining a compatible writing group, the next step is to locate one. There are a number of ways to go about this.

- Word of mouth is always the best. Friends who are writers, or who know other writers, may be able to tell you about groups to contact.
- Your local bookstore may post information on writing groups in the area or may sponsor its own group. Likewise, the local library may be home to a group of writers.
- Other organizations that sometimes host writing groups or can direct you in the right direction include YWCAs or YMCAs, city recreational departments, adult education centers, or civic groups.
- If your newspaper has a daily or weekly book section, you could contact the paper to see if they have information about groups.
- Writing conferences and workshops can be excellent sources of leads.
- The Internet can also connect writers in remote locations, or act as a help line, though meeting face-to-face is ideal.

Also, there are two great websites that often list local groups by location and interest: [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) and [www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org) . If you don't find an existing group to meet your needs, consider starting one yourself and posting it on one of these sites.

## Taking a Writing Class or Attending a Workshop

If the ongoing meetings of a writing group don't suit your schedule, you can still make contact with other writers by taking classes or going to the occasional workshop, seminar, conference, or retreat. Classes and workshops cost money, but they'll most likely be worth every penny if they're slanted to your genre and address your concerns.



Thinking about starting your own writers' group? Ask your library or bookstore if they'll post something in their newsletters or allow you to hang flyers on their bulletin boards.

Writing classes can provide you with both the fellowship and the feedback of your classmates, plus access to the experience and insights of the instructor. Classes—on creative writing, writing mechanics, and the business of writing—are most likely available through your local high school or college. Many classes are also offered through adult education centers and writers' organizations. Retail stores, too, can be a resource for instruction. For example, a travel store in my area offers occasional travel writing classes taught by experts. Travel agencies are another potential source: Classes and workshops are now given on cruise ships and in numerous ports of call as part of vacation/education packages. Classes are also given through cultural centers, and sometimes through art centers such as museums and galleries. Another major source is the Internet, where numerous websites offer a huge variety of courses. (Check Appendix B for information on workshops, classes, and writing-related websites.)

### The Writers' Connection

One of the highlights of attending a writers' workshop or conference is the opportunity to meet and learn from successful authors. Not only will you be inspired, but you may have the opportunity to have your work critiqued by an expert. Some workshops offer one-on-one sessions with instructors or provide small-group coaching or feedback opportunities. Workshop follow-ups may also be possible, through online communication or a series of classes. Because workshops are usually just a day or a weekend long, you'll want to immerse yourself in the experience and make the most of every minute.

Another big plus of workshops is the chance to hang out with other authors. Often there are breaks between sessions that allow attendees to get together

informally and share concerns and successes. “Talking shop” with other lovers of the language may turn you on to new techniques and resources and fire up your creativity. And the writers you meet may turn into lifelong friends.



Writers' colonies offer longer-term writing experiences. The intention is to provide writers with quiet, comfortable surroundings while they work on a project for a weekend, a month or longer.

Because so many different types of writing workshops are available, spend some time researching what's out there. Aim for a workshop that:

- Suits your focus and goal.
- Offers small classes.
- Features a respected, experienced author or instructor.
- Offers consultation with the keynote speaker or instructor.
- Provides an open, nonthreatening forum for learning.

To find out about upcoming conferences and workshops in your area, check notices in your local library or bookstore. ShawGuides.com lists writing conferences and retreats around the world. Writing magazines such as *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest* (see Appendix B for publishing information) also notify readers of programs each month. When you learn about several that sound interesting, write or e-mail for additional information and registration materials.

## Chapter 22. Getting Published

If you would like your work to be published, it's time to gear up for the business of getting it into print. That's right: business. To make it happen, you will need to put in a huge amount of work—as well as have determination, patience, and, in some cases, luck.

### Making It Happen

If you've never been published, you may believe that it's an easy step from completing your manuscript to the glamorous world of speaking tours and press interviews, perhaps lunching at chic restaurants with your agent or making an appearance on the *Today Show* to tout your book. Submission acceptances and publication contracts *do* happen, to first-timers as well as experienced writers, but only if you *make* them happen.



"You may think a previously unpublished writer has a difficult time breaking into the field. As with any profession, experience is valued, but that doesn't mean publishers are closed to new writers . . . most are open to professional submissions and good ideas from any writer."

—from *Writer's Market*

If you choose to seek out an established publisher rather than publish your work independently, you need to keep in mind that publishers are in business, too—not only to put beautifully crafted words into print but also to make money doing it. Publishers seek out work that will sell well, whether it's a travel article or a short story or a romance novel.

But even if your work meets every publishing criterion—it's brilliantly written, it would appeal to a wide audience, it could be sold through a variety of outlets, you have solid credentials—it still may not be gobbled up. Often, the decision on what's published has much to do with timing. A magazine you submit to may have just published an article on the same topic; yours may be better written and more engaging, but the magazine won't cover the same area again for some time. Or the editor may have set the topics for the next several issues, and yours isn't one of them. Or he may just not be interested in the subject you wrote about. A book publisher may love your writing but be on the lookout only for books covering the latest hot topics. While top-notch writing is important, having your work accepted by a publisher also involves dealing with many issues you can't control.

## Don't Get Discouraged

If being published is your goal, be encouraged by the fact that there are thousands of publishers throughout the world. Be encouraged by all the different venues that are open to aspiring writers: books, magazines, online publications, newspapers, newsletters, journals, business materials, scripts for the stage and screen, TV shows, and radio programs. There are many roads to getting published, and many writers have successfully walked down them. You can, too.



"You write a book and it's like putting a message in a bottle and throwing it in the ocean. You don't know if it will ever reach any shores. And there, you see, sometimes it falls in the hands of the right person."

—Isabelle Allende, novelist

## Protecting Your Work

Before you begin your quest for publication, you may want to register your work with the Copyright Office (as long as your work has been created in the United States). By registering your work you gain additional protection, particularly the ability to sue for damages in the case of infringement, and you can show legal proof of the date of your copyright.



Technically, once you complete a piece of writing—the moment it's in "fixed form"—the piece is copyrighted. Since 1989, no formal copyright notice has been necessary to protect work from illegal use by others.

Copyrighting your work makes it clear that you are the owner of the work and gives you all the rights and privileges of that ownership. It enables you to make and distribute copies of your work, to sell it or give it away. It prevents anyone else from publishing it and profiting from it without your permission. Protection covers any type of writing: book, article, short story, essay, song, poem, script, audiotape, videotape, and even a recipe—all "original works of authorship." Copyright protection does not extend to titles, facts, or ideas.

## To Copyright Your Work

If you want to play it safe and copyright your work, you'll need to fill out an application form and send it to the Copyright Office with a nonreturnable copy of your work, along with \$35 to \$65, depending if you how you file (paper filing, paper filing with barcode and shipping label, or electronic filing). Write to

the Library of Congress, Copyright Office, Register of Copyrights, 101 Independence Ave., S.E., Washington, DC 20559-6000. You can also download forms from [www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov). The website also offers additional copyright information, which you can also receive by calling (202) 707-3000.



For additional protection, screenwriters may want to send a copy of their work to the Writers Guild of America (see Appendix B for contact information). The guild will register your script, treatment, synopsis, or outline for five years, renewable for an additional five years.

Once your work is copyrighted, whether you register it or not, it's a good idea to include the copyright symbol (©), the year of copyright, and your name on any work you have published. In most cases, copyright protection extends for the lifetime of the author plus seventy years.

## Other Copyright Issues

Here is what else you should know about copyright laws and practices.

- **Work for Hire.** If you write a piece under a “work for hire” arrangement—you’re paid a one-time fee by a company and receive no royalties—the company, not you, owns the work. The company will hold the copyright.
- **Serial Rights.** When you sell a piece to a magazine, you retain the copyright. The magazine buys either the first or second serial rights. The first serial rights allow the magazine to be the first-time publisher of the work; the second serial rights are sold when the piece has been published before.

## Starting Small

If you have dreams of speaking tours and *Today Show* appearances, don’t give them up. Nourish them, but be realistic. If you’ve had little experience being published and haven’t built up a big audience yet, most likely you’re going to need to start much smaller. Some first-time writers do get contracts and their work does jump immediately to the bestseller lists, but that’s quite rare.

Local outlets, especially for nonfiction writers, are often a great way to break into print. The pay may be minuscule or nonexistent, but having clips or reviews to send along with agent or publishing house query letters can increase your chances of landing a contract (see the next section for information on how



to find an agent). Reaching a local audience may also be the first step in becoming known statewide or nationwide.

One successful writer who started small is memoirist and National Public Radio essayist Marion Winik. Winik started out writing for her hometown alternative weekly paper, the *Austin Chronicle*. Her commentaries were read there by a National Public Radio correspondent—and, soon after, her pieces were airing regularly on the radio. Travel writer Louise Purwin Zobel began freelancing for several small magazines, including *Medical Economics*. She also taught writing at local colleges. As her audience grew, she was asked to speak at local writers' group meetings, which led to her publishing a travel article in *Writer's Digest*, which in turn led to her writing a book on travel writing. Both authors started small and worked their way up the writing and publishing ladder.

If you're writing nonfiction, think about nearby media outlets for your work. These might include:

- Newspapers—your weekly or daily town newspaper or a nearby city paper, the local business paper, nearby college papers, and local trade journals
- Company newsletters
- Local cable TV channels, radio stations, and theater companies
- Local bookstores, libraries, cafés, and social clubs
- Community gatherings, workshops, and adult education classes
- The Internet

## Expanding Your Horizons

Once you've had some success locally, you can approach magazines and other publications with wider readership, but do your homework first. Target publications that feature the type of pieces you write. Study a variety of current magazines, newspapers, and books for similar work. Determine the publication's audience, approach, themes, and the length of the work they feature. Most publications have submission guidelines available. Search for them on the publication's website, or send the editor a self-addressed stamped envelope with a request.



Spend some time researching the various publishers and publications. As playwright George Bernard Shaw said, "Literature is like any other trade; you will never sell anything unless you go to the right shop."

You can also check such resources as *Books in Print* and *Writer's Market* to learn which subject areas different publishers focus on. Short-story writers can investigate “little” or “literary” magazines as well as the more competitive general interest publications. “Little” magazines are often regional and sometimes published by educational or cultural organizations. Short story writers’ guides and books like *The International Directory of Little Magazines & Small Presses* list a number of these lower-paying but well-respected publications.

## **Getting an Agent**

Once you’ve become known as an author or developed an audience, you may want to seek out a literary agent to handle your nonfiction or fiction book idea or screenplay concept. While most poets, short story writers, and nonfiction article writers don’t need the services of an agent, publishing-minded book authors and screenwriters can benefit from working with one.

But just what do literary agents actually do? And is it worth the 15 percent or more commission they’ll get from you for selling your proposal? Agents work for the authors they represent. They counsel and advise, give feedback, help with book or script development and the proposal, work to sell their authors’ books or screenplays at the best terms possible, and then handle any author/publisher or screenwriter/producer problems that come up after the sale. Your agent can become a great partner and guide your work as well as look out for your best interests.

## **A Connection to the Publisher**

One of the key things agents do is get your work seen by an editor, publisher, or producer who is likely to be interested in it. Agents generally spend a great deal of time developing relationships with editors and publishers and learning who handles what type of work. When they take on an author, they know who to approach with that author’s material and have already opened a communication channel. Often publishers won’t even look at work that isn’t submitted by an agent because they believe unrepresented authors have probably been turned down by several agents, and that signals to them that the work is not what they’re currently looking for. Agents act as screens for publishers as well as conduits for hot ideas and fresh faces—like yours!

## Negotiating Rights

Unless you're an attorney, you'll probably have a difficult time understanding a publishing contract. And with many publishing houses moving from print to into multimedia, there's a lot to navigate and, sometimes, negotiate.

An experienced agent will work with a publishing house to help you retain or sell the best rights possible to your work. These might include rights to sell an eBook version of your business book, TV or movie rights to your novel, or an audio version of your self-help book.

Your agent will also work to get you the best royalties possible and sometimes a higher advance. Yes, your agent will (typically) get 15 percent of everything you make, but they're working hard to earn that money.

## How to Find a Great Agent

Often you'll hear about a good agent from another writer, and some represented authors may even set up a meeting for you with their agent if they believe your work is promising. Writers' workshops, conferences, and classes (see Chapter 21) are excellent places to learn about respected agents. You can also locate agents in several printed resources, including the *Writer's Market* ; *The Everything® Get Published Book* ; the *Literary Marketplace* ; *The Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents* ; and the *Guide to Literary Agents* . Or you can contact professional writers' groups for recommendations. (See Appendix B for complete contact information.)



Agents can't take on all the authors who approach them, so solicit them with an outstanding query letter. Craft a specific, well-worded, enthusiastic letter that says exactly why you want that agent to represent you. Include a summary of your book, why it will sell, and your credits or experience.

## What Should You Look for in an Agent?

First of all, you want a representative who is excited by your work and shares your vision. When you look for an agent, double-check that the agent handles your type of material. Don't send a letter about your romance novel to an agent who handles only nonfiction. You also want someone who knows the publishing or screenwriting industry intimately and keeps up with changes in both "hot areas" and personnel.

Finding an agent with a good track record is also important; you can ask for

a list of recent sales and the agent's client list. You also want someone whose personality meshes with your own; if you're going to be working together, perhaps for a long time, it's important that you get along and that you agree with the agent's way of doing business. Your agent may not hold your hand—agents are often kept very busy working with a good number of clients—but she should respond quickly to your questions and be accessible.

Finally, a good agent will not charge you a fee to read your manuscript. To check if anyone has made a complaint about an agent's operation, you can contact your local Better Business Bureau.

## A Side Note

Editors at small presses are often open to reading work by writers not represented by an agent. The term *small press* refers to a publishing house that publishes only a few books each year, perhaps three or fewer. Small presses generally can't spend a lot on marketing, but they're often very committed to the books and the authors they take on. Listings of small presses can be found in the *Writer's Market* and other guides.



Even if you work with an agent you respect and trust, if you're offered a publishing contract or the agent asks you to sign a contract with him or her, you may still want to hire a lawyer to see that your rights are protected.

Remember, your agent works for you. Just as you'd ask for references if hiring an employee for your small business, ask agents for a list of former or current clients. Once you call the authors, ask about the agent's level of attentiveness, responsiveness, and how hard they worked to help the writer land a book deal.

## Dealing with Rejection

It's a fact of a writer's life: at some point, something you write is going to be rejected. Just about every author, famous or not, has come up against this painful moment.

Horror novel writer Stephen King saw seven of his novels rejected before *Carrie* was published. Dr. Seuss's *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* was rejected forty-three times before a friend finally published it. Lawrence J. Peter and Raymond Hull endured having their business classic *The Peter*

*Principle* turned down by thirty publishers before one gave them a contract. It can be incredibly depressing. And, yes, it hurts. And, yes, rejection letters can make you mad.

But it's simply impossible for every piece that every writer writes to be published. There aren't enough shelves in the world to hold all that writing. When you start looking for an agent or a publisher, prepare for the possibility that your work will be rejected. But read that last bit again; prepare for the possibility that your work will be rejected. *Your work. Not you.* This is terribly important to remember. If that form letter that you can barely stand to open tells you that your short story isn't being accepted for an anthology, remind yourself that it's the story, not you, that didn't make it in.



"Editors make mistakes. By actual count, 121 publishers said 'No thanks' to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* . . . *Lolita* [was] turned down too . . . *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* . . . *To Kill a Mockingbird* —rejected, every one."

—Judith Appelbaum, author of *How to Get Happily Published*

Remembering this might not make you any happier—it will probably still hurt that the piece you worked so hard on won't be in the book—but it should keep you from succumbing to that murderous self-doubt many writers have: I'm not good enough, I'll never be able to do this. You wrote something you're proud of, and it's very possible that a different publisher is out there looking for your very piece.

## The Common Motives

Work can be rejected for so many reasons. Some are legitimate: you didn't send it to a publisher who handles the kind of material you write, your wording was tired or lacked clarity, or the piece was too long or too difficult for the intended audience. But work is often rejected because the editor—one person—simply didn't like it, or because the topic was already covered, or because the editor had so many manuscripts to read that he didn't look past your cover letter or opening sentence. Whatever the reason, when a rejection notice drops into your mailbox, beat up your pillow, kick a pile of laundry, moan and groan, or let out a primal scream in your bathroom. Then put a copy of your work in a fresh, clean envelope, kiss it for luck, and send it to the next person (whom you of course researched thoroughly for suitability) on your list.

Many agents and editors don't have time for personal notes or conversations about rejections, so they will return your manuscript to you along with a form rejection slip. But sometimes you might receive a rejection letter, and this is actually a good letter to get. That's because it may give you some

information that you can use to improve your chances of success the next time. If the letter gives some reasons why your piece wasn't accepted, read them carefully and decide if you want to rework the piece to suit them—for example, to refocus it so it would appeal to a wider audience. If someone has signed the letter, you can also try to contact him to see if you can get additional information, perhaps a reaction to your book proposal or specific suggestions for improvement.

## Self-Publishing

Luckily, there are many, many resources available today to help the independent publisher. Word processing software and page design software are available at every computer store. Experienced freelance editors and proofreaders can be hired. Printers will print smaller quantities of copies, plus there's the new option of Print on Demand, or POD, which lets you print just the number of books you need at a time. You can also have your book published as an electronic book, which can be instantly downloaded as soon as the order is placed. These eBooks can also be distributed on CDs, disks, and DVDs. The Internet provides new marketing avenues in addition to the traditional bookstores and library readings, speaking engagements, press releases, mailers, and media spots. If you go with POD, there's no longer the problem of storing stacks of books; copies can be printed and shipped as the orders come in. You can also distribute your book through direct mail and retail stores, by advertising in magazines and newspapers, and by selling it yourself after speaking engagements or workshops.



Several books offer excellent, extensive self-publishing information: Robert Holt's *How to Promote and Sell Your Own Book*, Dan Poynter's *The Self-Publishing Manual*, Bill Henderson's *Publish-It-Yourself Handbook*, and Judith Appelbaum's *How to Get Happily Published*.

Even with all this help, it's an enormous amount of work. Self-publishing is not for everyone, and it's definitely not for you if you want writing to be your only business. But many independent publishers find the satisfaction of taking their work to the next step—placing their words on handsomely bound pages that will find their way into the hands of eager readers (and doing it their way)—a rewarding conclusion to the writing process.

Here are some tips to guide you through self-publishing and promoting:

- Self-publishing a book can cost from hundreds to thousands of dollars. Spend as much as your budget allows to produce a quality book; an

attractive, well-designed book will be much more appealing to potential readers than one thrown together with shoddy materials.

- Some authors handle every stage of self-publishing except the printing. But if your editing and proofreading skills aren't the best, consider hiring a professional; you don't want to end up with a great-looking book filled with typos and grammatical errors.
- Shop around for whatever parts of the process you hire out. Prices can differ widely among printers, editors, designers, and marketing professionals.
- Apply for an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) prefix for your book. You can apply at [www.bowker.com](http://www.bowker.com), a publishing information site. Or you can visit [www.isbn.org](http://www.isbn.org) and follow the application process. You can also apply at this site for the barcode you'll need for bookstore sales. Some self-publishing companies will get an ISBN for your book.
- Contact the Library of Congress for a preassigned card number. The address is 101 Independence Ave., S.E., Washington, DC 20559-6000; the website is [www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov)

To promote your work:

- Send releases to newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and writing-related websites.
- Organize readings and book-signing parties.
- Ask to speak at community or club events.
- Prepare and distribute media kits that include your bio, a photo, a fact sheet about your book, clips of reviews, and copies of any articles you've written.
- Contact local TV and radio stations about doing an interview.
- Post notices in bookstores and on your website.
- Send notices to everyone you know.
- Send review copies to anyone who writes about books.
- Find a well-known authority to endorse the book.
- Make T-shirts, pens, or bumper stickers that keep the book's name in front of people.
- Do it all again, and again.

One last point about self-publishing: it can be the route to a contract with an established publisher. Often publishers will become aware of a self-published book that's met with success and negotiate to take it on. This happened with

James Redfield, the author of the wildly popular *Celestine Prophecies*. Redfield self-published his book and sold it after speaking engagements. Eventually he drew an audience and ended up with a major contract from Warner Books.



For an all-encompassing source of independent publishing information, visit [www.published.com](http://www.published.com). The site details all that's involved in self-publishing; lists sources of writing and promotional assistance; lists printing and publishing sources, including for e-books; and links you to sites that provide essential application forms.

## Interview with Magazine Editor Mark Whiteley

Mark Whiteley is an editor, writer, videographer, and award-winning photographer. He is the editor of *Slap*, a ten-year-old skateboarding magazine that offers profiles, travel articles, pro interviews, industry news, how-tos, and product and music reviews for teen and older skateboard aficionados. Mark's work has been featured in *Slap* as well as in *Copper Press*, *Stance*, *The Kids' How to Do (Almost) Everything Guide*, *eHow*, and *Sunset* magazine.

**Q: How would you recommend that a writer new to a magazine approach the editor?**

**A:** Writers I haven't worked with before will usually call or e-mail to express an interest in writing for the magazine. I'll ask them to send me an example to read of something that would be suitable for the magazine. If the writing's decent, I'll get back in touch and ask if they have a story idea they want to work on. If they have something in mind, I'll ask them to write it, and if not, I'll ask them to write a short piece for one of the magazine's regular departments. A short or a report—I always start with something small. If they do a good job, I'll try to give them something longer the next time. Most of the writers who freelance regularly for the magazine started that way, and we've been working together for a couple of years now.

For music reviews, people generally send in a sample review they've had published in a newspaper or magazine, or online or in a college paper. Or sometimes writers say they have an interview lined up with a music group and, judging from the kinds of things the magazine covers, they thought it would interest me. They send the piece in, and if I like it, I'll try to use it. But if I can't use it right away, I'll try them out on a CD review.

• • •

**Q: Do you ever get involved in developmental editing?**



**A:** On longer articles, I work with the person before and while they're writing to shape the piece. I don't try to redirect it, but I make suggestions to help them along with it; we do a lot of brainstorming. Then, when they send it in, I'll do some more editing, changing some of the wording and the structure if it's needed. Writers need to be open to the fact that some of their work is going to be changed.

• • •

**Q: For features and interviews, do you ask writers to accompany their articles with photographs?**

**A:** To get a foot in the door, it's always a good idea for writers to send in photos with a feature idea. At least in *Slap*, most of our feature articles include photographs, because for a lot of readers it's more important to see the photos than to read the words. So being able to shoot a basic photo or knowing a photographer who can help you out is a big plus. Once you've shown what you can do and editors start to look to you as a regular contributor, they'll start assigning a staff photographer to work with you to get more in-depth coverage. But if you can present an entire idea for a story, including at least one photo, it's really helpful. It's good to have the whole package, even if it's a small one. Music reviews and interviews don't need to be accompanied by photos—usually the record label will provide artwork or we'll send a staff photographer on an interview.

• • •

**Q: How do you decide which feature articles to run?**

**A:** I look for a writer with a deep knowledge of the field, who's been around or who's done a lot of homework. It's generally a good idea for a writer to propose a hot topic—especially with the teenage market, which sometimes needs the latest thing to hold their attention—but for me it's more important that the writer has an understanding of the finer points of the subject and an understanding of the culture. Readers look to writers to learn what's going on, for insight, and they don't like to be tricked or told something that's not true. As far as music reviews go, I look for someone who can describe the feeling you get from a piece of music, who can convey that. I don't want a report here—it shouldn't be an exercise in superlatives. Being able to talk about feelings and, again, having experience with the type of music are more important. Plus being able to write with flair.

• • •

**Q: Do you have other suggestions for writers who want to approach a new publication?**

**A:** When writers contact me, I assume they're getting in touch because they've studied and know my magazine and like it above other similar ones. You really need to study publications before you approach them to see the subtle differences between them and to learn what kinds of articles they publish. Then you're more likely to make a connection.

## Appendix A. Writing Samples

### Short Story Excerpt

#### Impressionists in Winter

by Susan Fry

*An hour and a half.* I sighed again. Until several years ago, of course, painting outside during the winter at all would have been impossible. That's when paint was stored and carried in pigs' bladders, which froze and chipped in cold weather. Now that we had paints in little metal tubes, even cold couldn't prevent us from coaxing them out onto the palette in the most freezing storm. Of course, we still needed the little braziers nearby as a source of heat. I lit mine. Its flame was the brightest thing in the landscape. It barely warmed my hands.

The brush felt stiff and unwieldy through my fur-lined gloves. The paint was truculent, congealing from the cold as soon as I got it onto the canvas. I was tempted to paint exactly what I saw: straight lines, black, white, gray. But I knew that a painting like that wouldn't get me into Monet's exhibition. Even if it did, I'd probably be banned from the Academy for life. So instead I began to dab little spots of stiff paint onto the canvas, hoping they would resolve into something recognizable.

Time passed. My painting grew. The scene got more and more ugly. I felt shivers run up the backs of my legs and my spine, as if someone were watching us. My feet, even in their knee-length boots, had somehow gotten wet. I stomped each one to bring life back into my frozen toes. I pulled my hat lower over my forehead, and my scarf higher across my nose.

I wasn't going to be the first one to say that we should go back. René had called me a "lazy dog" the day before, and I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me admit to being cold.

Finally, René said, with apparent regret, "The light's changing. We should come back tomorrow." He stood up, stretched, and looked over at me.

Some stubborn streak in my personality made me say, "You go ahead. I want to finish one last thing."

He grinned as if he knew exactly what I was doing, but he packed up and went back to the inn. I counted a hundred frozen puffs of breath before I finally

allowed myself to pack up as well. By then the shadows had lengthened. The trees looked as if they had feet and could walk after me. And as I left, I felt more shivers up my back, as if something was indeed following me.

It's just an ordinary lane, I told myself, but I was relieved to get back to the warmth of the inn.

From "Impressionists in Winter," by Susan Fry, *The Museum of Horrors* . Edited by Dennis Etchison (Leisure Books, 2001). Reprinted with permission of the author.

## Screenplay Excerpt

### ANGEL AND BIG JOE

by Bert Salzman

Time is the present. The place is an agricultural area in southern New Jersey.

EXT. SMALL RURAL TWO-LANE HIGHWAY - DAY

ANGEL DIAZ, 14, walks along the highway carrying a paper shopping bag and a can of kerosene. It is cold. We hear the wind sounding through the trees. Angel's field jacket is turned up against the cold as he trudges down the road.

CUT TO:

EXT. SAME HIGHWAY FURTHER ALONG - DAY

A telephone company panel truck is parked on the shoulder, and a telephone lineman—BIG JOE, 45—is on a pole as Angel passes below. Angel stops to rest for a moment, and puts down the heavy can of kerosene. He looks up at Big Joe.

ANGEL

It's cold, huh?

BIG JOE

Cold? This ain't cold.

Angel picks up the can of kerosene and begins to walk off.

ANGEL  
(muttering to himself)  
Well, for me it's cold.

CUT TO:  
EXT. BARREN FIELD - DAY  
Low-angle shot of Angel walking.

ANGEL (V.O.)  
I'm what people call a migrant worker. That means me and my family travel all over the country picking crops. You know like beans and grapes and lettuce and things like that. Me and my mother and my brother Nikki were living out in the migrant shacks out by the tomato fields. The tomatoes had already been picked, and the other migrant workers' families had left. My father was out in Arizona looking for work, and we were waiting for him to telephone us to tell us where to go. And so I was getting nervous because we were running out of money and I didn't know what to do.

Angel approaches a drab cement block migrant shack. He puts down the kerosene can and enters the building.

CUT TO:  
INT. SHACK'S KITCHEN - DAY

Angel puts the paper bag down on the kitchen table and sits.

CUT TO:  
INT. SHACK'S BEDROOM - DAY

Angel's MOTHER and five-year-old BROTHER NIKKI are sitting in bed with blankets over their legs. They are both dressed with heavy sweaters against the cold. The mother looks up when she hears Angel enter.

MOTHER  
Angel? Angel?

She rises from the bed and heads toward the kitchen.

CUT TO:  
INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Mother enters the kitchen and walks to the kitchen table and inspects the contents of the grocery bag. Angel sits reading a comic book. Mother begins to take cans from the bag.

MOTHER

That's all you bought?

ANGEL

We hardly got any more money.

MOTHER

What happened to the money Poppa left?

ANGEL

(impatiently)

We spent it.

MOTHER

How are we going to eat if we ain't got money?

ANGEL

I don't know. Why don't you ask Poppa how we gonna eat?

Angrily, Angel's Mother grabs him by the arm and pulls him upright.

MOTHER

Don't you talk to your mother that way.

*¡Ten respeto!*

Mother sits at the table. She places her hands over her face and sobs softly. Angel puts down the comic book and looks at her guiltily. He rises and puts his arms around his mother.

ANGEL

(gently)

I'm sorry, Mommy, okay? Don't cry. I'm going to call Aunt Marie in Texas. Maybe she knows where Poppa is. Okay.

Angel walks to the door. His mother watches with a sad look.

CUT TO:  
EXT. SHACK - DAY

Angel walks to a pay phone hanging on the wall of the shack. He picks up the receiver and drops a coin into the phone. After several moments, when there is no dial tone, Angel clicks the receiver several times. When no coin returns, he begins to bang on the telephone.

Mother exits the shack and stands by the door.

MOTHER  
Angel, what happened?

ANGEL  
(frustrated)  
The phone don't work.

MOTHER  
(very concerned)  
The phone don't work? How's Poppa going to call? Angel, you have to bring a man to fix the phone.

ANGEL  
Don't worry, Momma, I'll get someone to fix it.  
(to himself)  
Always something going wrong.

He walks off.

CUT TO:  
EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Angel walks up to the telephone panel truck that he had passed earlier. He stops a few feet from the telephone pole and looks up.

ANGEL  
Hey, mister.

The lineman does not respond.

ANGEL  
(louder)  
Hey, mister.

BIG JOE  
What do you want?

ANGEL  
I want you to come fix my phone. It's broken.

BIG JOE  
You gotta call the telephone office.

ANGEL  
How am I gonna call the telephone office if my phone's broken?

BIG JOE  
Use somebody else's phone.

ANGEL  
(frustrated)  
Whose?

BIG JOE  
Whose. I don't know. Anybody else's. That's whose.

Big Joe returns to the work he was doing.

ANGEL  
(really annoyed)  
Hey, mister.  
Big Joe doesn't respond.

ANGEL  
(shouting)  
Hey, mister.

Angel begins to pound on the truck.

BIG JOE



Hey, beat it.

ANGEL

(shouting)

I ain't gonna beat it until you come and fix my phone . . .

Angel walks to the telephone pole. He pulls two climbing pegs from the pole.

ANGEL

. . . and you ain't coming off that pole until you come and fix my phone.

Big Joe looks down with a bemused smile, a mixture of annoyance and admiration at Angel's determination.

BIG JOE

Where do you live?

ANGEL

In the houses behind the tomato fields.

Big Joe looks in the direction of the migrant shacks.

BIG JOE

I thought all you people moved out a couple months ago.

ANGEL

No. Some of us people are still here. And some of us people even got broken telephones.

BIG JOE

Okay, I'll call my office and they'll send a man tomorrow.

ANGEL

No good!

BIG JOE

What do you mean "No good"?

ANGEL

It's gotta get fixed today.

BIG JOE

What's the hurry?

ANGEL

The hurry is my father's supposed to call from Arizona.

BIG JOE

So he'll call tomorrow.

ANGEL

Aw, come on, man. My mother's home crying and you're just going to sit up there doing nothing.

(frustrated)

What is it with you?

BIG JOE

(sympathetic)

All right. I'll call the office and see if it's all right, OK?

CUT TO:

EXT. SHACK - DAY

Angel sits on a stool as Big Joe begins to repair the pay phone.

ANGEL

Pretty cold, eh?

BIG JOE

So go inside.

ANGEL

It's cold inside, too.

BIG JOE

No heat?

Angel shakes his head.

ANGEL

Not too much. Doesn't matter 'cause soon as my father calls we'll be leaving for Arizona.

Angel looks down at Big Joe's tool box and he sees the name "Big Joe" written on a piece of tape.

ANGEL

(amused, to himself)

Big Joe from Mexico. Hey, Big Joe, you got any jobs around your house? Paint your garage. Clean your attic. You know, that kind of stuff.

BIG JOE

No, no jobs, sorry.

Big Joe dials the phone and talks to his telephone office.

BIG JOE

Hello, this is Joe Zunza. Give me a check on 555-9728 and call me right back.

He hangs up and immediately we hear the phone ring. Joe picks up the receiver.

BIG JOE

Yeah, how's the line look? Okay, thanks, release the line.

(to Angel)

Okay, your phone's working.

Joe takes out a notebook.

BIG JOE

Okay, what's your name?

ANGEL

Angel.

BIG JOE

What?

ANGEL

Angel. You know, like in heaven?

He makes a halo over his head with his hands.

BIG JOE

Angel what?

ANGEL

Angel Diaz.

BIG JOE

How do you spell that?

ANGEL

D-I-A-Z.

BIG JOE

C?

ANGEL

No, D-I-A-Z.

Angel's mother approaches holding a jar of hot coffee and offers it to Big Joe.

MOTHER

Hot coffee, mister?

BIG JOE

No, no thank you, ma'am, I gotta go.

(to Angel)

Hope you get your call, Angel.

Big Joe walks to the panel truck and drives off.

CLOSE-UP of Angel, who watches the truck move away.

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## **Letter to the Editor**

by Shirley Ledgerwood

Editor,

I wonder how many of us in the plush economy of Silicon Valley are aware that the richest 1 percent of people own more than 35 percent of the nation's wealth, according to the *New York Times Magazine* . 14.5 million (or 20.5 percent) of children live in poverty. Also, a large number of families are losing access to food stamps under federal welfare repeal. Add to this the homeless, who are of course at the bottom of the barrel.

The ideology of "personal responsibility" and "welfare-to-work" forms a mainstream of discourse around poverty and homelessness instead of a good look at the regressive policies that cause poverty: lack of jobs, of housing, and of education.

In light of these sad facts, I wish to give a tribute to the humaneness of a group called Peninsula Interfaith Action that has met in Palo Alto to begin a crusade for a community multiservice day facility for the homeless. This alliance of sixteen churches plus civic organizations is spearheaded by the All Saints Episcopal Church and the First Presbyterian Church, both of Palo Alto. It is supported by representatives of the city councils of Palo Alto and Menlo Park, of Stanford, of the Chamber of Commerce, the Red Cross, and others.

I urge the readers of this paper to come to the second meeting of this group to be held June 16 at 7:30 at All Saints Episcopal Church on Hamilton and Waverley. Your support will help furnish a meal for the homeless, lockers, showers, and a place to do laundry, as well as counseling for rehabilitation and job-skills training.

Letter to the editor first printed in the *Palo Alto Weekly* , June 10, 1998.

## **Travel Piece**

### **There's Family Fare on Berkeley's Fourth Street**

by Carol Whiteley

If you've always thought of Berkeley as a destination only for multipierced

teens and twenty-somethings, you may be in for a surprise—a day trip to the city’s Fourth Street area should please just about everyone in your family.

Only minutes from the Bay (take the University exit off Route 80, turn left on Sixth and left again on Hearst), close enough to catch the cooling breezes, the long block of Fourth between Hearst and Virginia is the unassuming home to an inviting mix of shops and services. Once you park in the big public lot at Hearst and Fourth or in one of the flower-lined lots further along, you and your fellow day-trippers can begin enjoying a great break-from-the-beach summer outing.

Start your day by arriving early enough to grab a table or some counter space at **Bette’s Oceanview Diner** —by nine a line usually begins to form, one that can last all day. Bette’s opened its doors in 1982, and still serves up great diner-style fare: a big choice of breakfast dishes (the Maryland boasts poached eggs and corned beef hash, or you can have your scrambles accompanied by one of Bette’s popular cream scones), and tasty and filling lunch plates, including New York franks, BLTs, and meatloaf. The jukebox at the front, and the smaller ones that sit on the counter and tables, feature a wild mix of rhythm-and-blues titles, plus songs in French and German—there’s even a French song sung by the late actor Omar Sharif. The comfy surroundings (Formica tables, highchairs available), cheerful bustle, and abundance of good food make Bette’s a great place to gear up for the day. Once everyone’s fed, you can start walking and exploring. One good way to approach the street might be to size up your group, then hit the spots that will be of most interest. Just be sure to stop every now and then to enjoy the sights and sounds—there are lots of benches and newspaper racks to entice those in need of a break to rest and people-watch; there’s a row of beautifully cared-for Victorian houses to ooh and aah over at the end of the parking lot that runs between Fourth and Sixth; and there may even be an accordion-playing cowboy or a silly juggler to entertain the troops when you take a break for croissants, colas, or cones.

**For fashion plates:** If one or more of your group are into fashion, they’ll be very glad they came along. The small but chic **Rabat** features out-of-the-ordinary shoes for men and women. Many of the lines are European, and many won’t be found in local department stores. Robert Clergerie, Luc Berjen, and little-seen Stuart Weitzman models are just some of the footwear on display. The upscale but casual store also offers a small selection of sunglasses, watches, and purses.

Several women’s-clothing shops offer department store alternatives. The artfully decorated **Molly’s** is filled with loose, drapery linens and silks, plus many styles with a vintage or European feel. **Mishi’s**, which is actually on Fifth Street across from the parking lot that crosses from mid-Fourth to Fifth, has a slightly

younger appeal. The bright colors and natural fabrics are touted as “100% wearable,” and there’s a great choice of easy tops and skirts, plus jackets and tees to tempt you. (You can find the Mishi line in some department stores, but there’s a much wider selection here.) **Bryn Walker** is another small shop where you can find dressier, flowing styles and handsome jewelry, particularly pins; **Margaret O’Leary** features lovely, very contemporary fashion firsts.

**For readers: Cody’s Bookstore** is a big, inviting Berkeley favorite. Quiet and bright, with plenty of room to wander and browse (the family dog can even have a snooze between the aisles while you choose), the store has excellent travel, cooking, and business sections, as well as well-stocked nature, kids’ books, and fiction areas. Several times a week the store holds readings and other events, and for those who live in the Berkeley area, book delivery is available by Pedal Express. Another great place to find just what you’re looking for is **Builders Booksource**, whose shelves carry just about everything for the home owner or builder: books on urban planning, interior design, building codes, environmental issues, gardening, architecture, and house plans, to name just a few. (If you get hungry while you’re browsing, they even sell chocolate tools.)

**For kids:** Younger kids, especially girls, will love the **Sweet Potatoes** clothing store. The store carries sizes newborn through 7, and a truly terrific range of styles. All of the lines, including Marimekko, Big Fish, and Little Arlene, are Sweet Potatoes’ own brands, and while they do sell to department stores, you’ll find a huge selection here. You’ll also find the Goody Goody line of shoes—some are topped with adorable leather daisies—plus beachwear and cozy comforters.

**Hearth Song** is another great spot for kids. Here they can try out a kid-sized, ladybug-style tent, play a junior-sized guitar, fall in love with a huge Madeleine doll or stuffed gorilla, or choose from the wonderful animal posters, books, puzzles, and crafts. They also can find their own area in **Cody’s Bookstore** (see above); the kids’ section surrounds a real-life version of one of the paintings from the beloved children’s book *Goodnight Moon*, and kids can hunker down there and read. Older kids might enjoy some of the unusual items in **Zosaku**, including sushi-shaped candles, or find just the magazine they’ve been looking for while they slurp down a fresh-fruit smoothie at **Juicy News**. They can also check out the latest sounds at the small **Hear Music** store.

**For gardeners/home bodies:** On the corner of Hearst and Fourth, **Summer House** offers lovely and unusual home accessories to those who like to decorate. The items on hand change every few weeks, but at the time of this writing the shop carried beautiful appliquéd shower curtains, whimsical papier-mâché wallhangings by a European artist, tiny boxes that looked like elegant wedding

cakes, a gorgeous library table, and thigh-high column candles, to name a few. For more substantial furnishings, there are lots of contemporary pieces at **Slater/Marinoff**, and older styles at **Traditions Antiques**. And for those who can never stock their kitchen well enough, there's **Sur la Table**, with a truly juicy choice of kitchen supplies.

**For foodies:** If all the shopping and savoring starts stomachs grumbling, there are a number of places to ease the pain. To add to your Bette's breakfast experience, you might want to take a mid-morning break at **Bette's To-Go and Deli**. There's a great choice of bakery items and coffee to be found, plus for those who need a bigger pick-me-up, sandwiches, tacos, and pizza. For lunch you'll have big decisions to make: oysters at the **Oyster Bar and Meat Market**, Asian fare at **Ginger Island**, East Meets West delicacies at **O Chame**, or takeout salads and sandwiches from the wonderful shops in **Market Plaza**, where you can sit outside and watch the world go by. Then, if you can't contemplate making dinner after your day out, you can stop back at the Plaza on the way home for all the fixings, from ready-to-cook roasted carrot and garlic ravioli to shepherd's pie to pad thai.

## Essay Excerpt

### **The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, Urban Design, and the New Public Space**

by Ocean Howell

#### **Abstract**

Skateboarding is a thorn in the side of landscape architects, planners, and building owners; so much so that there are now design workshops that teach a series of defensive architectural tactics for deterring the activity. The type of skateboarding that plagues these architects and the spaces they create, "street skating," has only existed for about fifteen years, and in fact was born out of the barren, defensive spaces created by redevelopment. Thus street skating is not only an impetus for defensive architecture, but also a symptom of defensive architecture. Recognizing that redevelopment spaces fostered pathologies, cities and corporations have begun to build more friendly spaces in the past fifteen years. But they have been careful to ensure that the spaces are only friendly to a select subset of the public, namely, office workers and consumers. It is not only



skateboarding that is excluded, but also any activity not directly tied to either production or consumption, including, in many cases, simply lying down on a bench.

To create such spaces requires detailed knowledge of the minutest details of undesirable behaviors—a knowledge that can only be gleaned through surveillance. Because the resultant spaces appear open but exclude the vast majority of the citizenry, they are not public spaces at all, but rather sophisticated simulations of public space. Although this essay will argue that the destructive effects of skateboarding have been exaggerated, the purpose is not to argue that skateboarding should be permitted in public space. It is by virtue of its status as a misuse of these spaces—and because it is a symptom of defensive design—that skateboarding is exceptionally good at drawing attention to the quietly exclusionary nature of the new public space. Ultimately, skateboarding affords an observer glimpses of the larger processes of surveillance and simulation by which public space, both physical and cultural, is produced. . . . Through the example of skateboarding, this essay will argue that the determination of which activities are legitimately public and which activities are pathological is nearly indistinguishable from the determination of which activities generate profit and which activities threaten profit.

Michael Fotheringham, the architect who is presently giving San Francisco's Union Square a makeover, explains how good design should focus on the "needs and comforts" of the "prime client" (Hansen April 2001, 23). Where designers used to talk about "citizens," they now talk about "consumers." Public space is commercial space. Literature on cities is replete with the metaphor of public space as the site, the physical embodiment, of democracy. Its purpose is to facilitate interaction between all citizens, not just consumers; it exists to foster debate—even conflict—among the various competing interests that are represented in the citizenry. To these ends, a public space should be both "physically and psychologically accessible" (Loukaitou 1998, 301), as Kevin Lynch would put it, to the public, in all of its unmanageable diversity.

The work of William H. Whyte alone provides abundant evidence that when this is accomplished, a space will not need to be managed from the outside—it will regulate itself. . . . [M]any critics, like Rosalyn Deutsche, rightly argue that there has never been a space that unequivocally welcomes the public, that constructions of publicness have always entailed exclusions. Certainly Frederic Law Olmsted's Central Park, one of the most beneficent of all public works, represents a paternal and missionary philosophy of public space. The idea was to manufacture a bucolic idyll in the dense urban center in order to divert the potentially revolutionary passions of the workers away from the industrial

system that subjugated them. Allowing the workers to mingle with the elites was to have the effect of civilizing the lower classes. Later, City Beautiful plans—which were always sponsored by corporations (Loukaitou 1998, 17)—sought to “inspire” good citizenship among the lower classes with grand neoclassical symmetries.

Even though these spaces fall short of the ideal democratic space, the fact is that the marginalized were still conceived of as a presence. While these spaces took it as their duty to gently coerce the dispossessed, thus acknowledging the presence if not the necessity of conflict, the new public spaces have taken up the task of denying the existence of competing viewpoints and the people who advance them. The new spaces take as their ideal not the public space as a site of debate, but the public space as a site of repose for consumers and clients. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Tridib Banerjee point out, in their book *Urban Design Downtown*, how the design metaphors that architects use to describe public spaces have shifted from the “plaza” and the “green” to the “room,” “terrace,” “court,” “garden,” and other soothing, private spaces (1998, 229).

Skateboarding is not terribly important in the grand scheme of things; it is a young counterculture that admirably seeks to challenge power relations and less admirably seeks to escape from them. But it does provide a unique perspective on the creeping privatization of public space. Homelessness, drug abuse, and prostitution have been around—in various forms and in varying degrees of severity—probably as long as cities have; and they are undoubtedly exacerbated by exclusionary design insofar as they are isolated and ghettoized. Skateboarding is clearly different from these urban pathologies in that it is a recreational activity, not a sustaining activity. But it is further different in that it is not only an impetus for exclusionary architecture, but also the direct product of exclusionary architecture. Like the Freudian symptom of “return of the repressed,” skateboarding was born out of the defensive, barren plazas of redevelopment—on the sites where street life was forcibly subverted to property values.

Of course, no one defends redevelopment spaces anymore, and there has been a push for a resurgence of the public sphere in cities. The designers of public spaces in Giuliani’s New York, for example, have taken certain of William H. Whyte’s recommendations to heart, creating spaces that people want to inhabit. But they have been careful about selecting which people. The redevelopment spaces succeeded in excluding the marginalized people whose neighborhoods they supplanted, but their hostility also warded off the middle class whose safety the spaces sought to assure. Pleasant spaces have the opposite problem of welcoming everyone. To attract the upscale public while deterring

the masses has been a primary urban design goal of the last ten years. This is a complicated task that this essay will argue has only been accomplished with extensive surveillance of undesirable behavior. This information is used to create exclusionary spaces that appear public to the selected users; it is used to simulate a public sphere. Through a discussion of how skateboarding has been appropriated by corporate marketers, this essay will also argue that the cultural space of advertising and public opinion is produced by the same processes of surveillance and simulation. . . .

### **Misused Transportation/Misused Space: A Brief History**

Skateboarding was invented in the 1950s in Southern Californian beach towns when surfers tore the T-handlebars off their scooters and skated on the asphalt banks of the local schoolyards as though they were surfing waves. The sport quickly took on a life of its own, and throughout the '70s people could be found riding in the empty backyard swimming pools of vacant houses. The basic move was to ride up the transitioned wall of the pool, slide along the edge, and plunge back down the wall. Soon cities and private companies began building pools exclusively for skateboarders. The most commonly accepted story about the origin of street skating starts with a group of skaters being thrown out of the privately owned Skate City park in Whittier, California, in the early 1980s. Apparently they didn't have the money to pay the entrance fee, so they snuck in. After being escorted out, a professional skater named John Lucero led the group in a kind of sarcastic protest in the parking lot. In full view of the owners of the park and the skaters inside, they began to do tricks on the edges of the curbs, as though they were the edges of a pool. These undesirables came back and did this day after day and soon skaters from inside the park came out to try this new style.

In the early and mid-80s the style expanded out of the suburban parking lot and into the more varied terrain of redeveloped urban centers, primarily Los Angeles and San Francisco. This happened to coincide with America's explosion of personal liability suits and, although *Landscape Architecture* magazine reported in March 1998 that there has never been a successful skateboarding liability suit (Thompson, p. 82), nearly every one of the parks was bulldozed—to be replaced by family fun centers. By and large, the only people who could continue to practice the old style were those who could afford to build private ramps. Thus street skating quickly became the most urban and populist version of the sport: it didn't cost anything except the price of the board itself, and it could be done anywhere there was pavement. In 1999 there were an estimated 9.5 million skateboarders in the U.S. alone (Levine July 26, 1999; 70), and by all

accounts, skateboarders are now a strong presence in nearly every modern city, from San Francisco to Osaka to São Paulo.

For length reasons, this essay cannot undertake a study of the socioeconomic characteristics of skateboarders. But it is important to note that American skaters are typically from lower-middle-class families: they are economically stable but don't usually continue their education past high school. And while many influential skaters have come from the upscale suburbs of Marin, Orange County, and the San Fernando Valley; at least as many have come from such neighborhoods as East Hollywood, Gardena, and [San Francisco's] Mission.

### **Skate and Destroy/Skate and Create**

. . . . Skateboarding is not protest or activism, but is more like what Michel de Certeau described, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* , as a “spatial practice.” Skateboarding is “a certain play within a system of defined places” (1984, 106). As the public space of the Central Business District (CBD) becomes more authoritarian, skateboarding “authorizes the production of an area of free play on a checkerboard that analyzes and classifies identities. It makes places habitable” (1984, 106). William H. Whyte provides a good example of a spatial practice, in his film *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* , when he affectionately shows how people can find a place to sit even where they are architecturally discouraged from doing so. In a demonstration of remarkable adaptability and quotidian creativity, people place small blankets over spikes that are meant to intimidate them, balance on intentionally narrow ledges overlooking fountains, and remain perched on canted planters that are designed to deposit them right back onto the sidewalk (1998b). Whyte laments the way that open spaces enhance a corporate image while alienating the public that they nominally serve. In one scene he shows an intentionally solitary bench, and announces that, “this is a design object, the purpose of which is to punctuate architectural photos” (1988b). But because there are no obstructions (people), this is precisely the type of bench that skateboarders love to inhabit. In spite of the corporate space's disregard for the public, a small, resourceful portion of the public can still find a way to put the space to public use.

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## Poem

### Reading Chaucer at Broadway Laundromat near Columbia University

by Louis Phillips

I too have longed to go on pilgrimages,  
Forget the daily grind, the Oval  
Offices of Debt & Power outages,  
But this is as far as I travel,  
To 107th, the Broadway Laundromat  
To seek the holy blissful martyrdom  
Of immaculate underwear.

Amid the bleach of relics,  
I contemplate the navel  
Of a tanktopped coed, &  
Watch my shirts & socks unravel.  
At my elbow, with her red stockings,  
Someone's Wife of Bath  
Turns the pages of a lurid novel,  
A bodice ripper, while the homeless  
Wander in & out, seeking warmth;  
A student from Columbia  
Pushes a red shopping cart of books,  
Jots copious notes  
On the music of Ravel.  
I counted 9 & 20 in all. No Kings,  
Nor friars, nor monks, &  
Certainly I am no parfit gentil knight.  
I have twin sons, but not one Squire  
To carve at table for me,  
Tho lusty are & sing all night.

Tho separated by centuries,  
Geoffrey and I utter the same prayer:  
That Christ have mercy on us &  
Forgive our sins in someone's translation.  
We unwashed kneel at Maytag driers,  
Every machine numbered  
Like squat football players.  
A blonde with a voice of gravel  
Speaks of love most transiently.  
The change machine,  
In its own dour voice,  
Dispenses quarters all day long.  
Can never have too many quarters.  
A Pakistani in a black stockingcap,  
Announces a snow event: "The snow  
Will cover all the germs," he says.  
"This city has too many germs, &  
Everybody is sick with flu."  
I start a letter to a friend:

“If you need someone to grovel  
At your funeral, here’s one cheap.”  
Wide of girth, with a head  
Like a berry, a Jamaican lady  
Stirs our juices with stamp & go,  
Codfish cakes with hot red peppers.  
Nothing in this universe  
Sells anymore two for a penny.  
As wind bears snow & sleet  
Up & down the frozen street,  
All my clothes are heaped  
Upon the white communal table.  
All these lives are in tumble, &  
I make thirty in this company.

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## Appendix B. Writing Resources

### Books

- Brewer, Robert. *Writer's Market*. Writer's Digest Books, 2009. The complete publishing guide: listings of publishers, agents, magazines, websites, screenwriting and playwriting markets, contests, and so much more. Also see *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*, *Poet's Market*, and *Novel and Short-Story Writer's Market*.
- Burt-Thomas, Wendy. *The Writer's Digest Guide to Query Letters*. Writer's Digest Books, 2009. Learn how to write query letters for magazine articles, nonfiction, novels, children's books, and more. Includes samples of good and bad queries.
- Cameron, Julie. *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. J. P. Tarcher, 1992. Many readers have used this twelve-week program to foster creativity in different aspects of their lives. The book offers exercises and techniques for freeing up creativity by overcoming fear, jealousy, and other blocks. Also check Cameron's other books on creativity: *The Artists' Way Workbook*, *The Vein of Gold*, and *Walking in this World*.
- Cohen, Sage. *Writing the Life Poetic: An Invitation to Read and Write Poetry*. Writer's Digest Books; 2009. Assists in building skills and confidence in a poetic voice. Craft issues are addressed, but in informal nonacademic style.
- Curthoys, Ann and Ann McGrath. *How to Write History That People Want to Read*. UNSW Press, 2009. A guide to all types of writers of history—family historians, students, academics—on research, organization, and writing. Includes examples.
- Doyen, Barbara. *The Everything® Get Published Book*. Adams Media, 2006. All the information you need to get your manuscript in print.
- Fogarty, Mignon. *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*. Holt Paperbacks, 2008. Tips on punctuation, capitalization, commonly

misused words, and more.

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- Herman, Jeff. *Jeff Herman’s Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Literary Agents*. Sourcebooks, Inc., 2009. Names and areas of interest for thousands of editors, publishers, and agents, plus advice and tips for writers.
- James-Enger, Kelly. *Ready, Aim, Specialize!*. Writer, Inc., 2003. Techniques and tips on developing a niche, finding sources, maximizing your time and income, and breaking in to the freelance market.
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- King, Stephen. *On Writing* . Pocket, 2002. The horror master shares his stories about becoming a published writer, including advice, early influences, and addiction.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird*. Anchor, 1995. Following her father’s advice to her brother to take writing a report on birds “bird by bird,” Lamott has written a number of outstanding novels that focus on modern relationships. In this “instruction guide,” she shares her techniques for and feelings about creative writing.

- Larsen, Michael. *How to Write a Book Proposal* (third edition). Writer's Digest Books, 2004. The top resource for creating a book proposal that gets your manuscript published. Includes sample proposals and guidelines to promote your book.
- Maass, Donald. *Writing the Breakout Novel*. Writer's Digest Books, 2002. Discusses patterns found in all breakout novels and how to improve your chances of success by implementing these elements in your own book.
- Maslen, Andy. *The Copywriting Sourcebook*. Marshall Cavendish Limited, 2010. Step-by-step advice on writing advertising and website copy, direct mail letters, and more.
- Morrell, David. *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing: A Novelist Looks at His Craft*. Writer's Digest Books, 2003. A how-to for writers on developing plot, structure, characters, and dialogue. Includes real-life examples from the author and other writers.
- *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*. Random House, 2005. Over 207,000 definitions, plus tips and information for writers. Available with a CD-ROM.
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- Strunk, William, and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. FQ Classics, 2007. Many consider this to be *the* guide to writing well, whether you write novels, letters, term papers, or plays. Making "every word tell" is the focus of this small masterpiece.
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- *Writer's Essential Desk Reference*. Writer's Digest Books, 2001. Great information and advice for freelancers, from tips on agents to copyright law

to promoting your book.

- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well, 30th Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Collins, 2006. Covers a variety of types of writing, including technical, business, sports, and humor, with tips on writing clearly and without clichés.

## Websites and Blogs

[www.aaronline.org](http://www.aaronline.org)

The site of the Association of Authors' Representatives, a not-for-profit organization of independent literary and dramatic agents.

<http://askWendy.wordpress.com>

A blog dedicated to author interviews, writing contests, and answering writers' questions.

[www.authorlink.com](http://www.authorlink.com)

An information service for writers, agents, and editors.

[www.bookzone.com](http://www.bookzone.com)

An epublication and Print on Demand (POD) service source, plus information on online promotion, industry news, and links to other publishing and writing-related sites.

[www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov)

The homepage for the U.S. Copyright Office. You can also receive copyright information by writing to the Copyright Office at 101 Independence Ave., S.E., Washington, DC 20559-6000, or calling (202) 707-3000.

[www.favoritepoem.org](http://www.favoritepoem.org)

Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky's site for encouraging poetry in the classroom.

[www.guidetoliteraryagents.com](http://www.guidetoliteraryagents.com)

Chuck Sambuchino's website and attached blog offering advice on agents, including real stories from writers on how they landed representation.

[www.instantpublisher.com](http://www.instantpublisher.com)

Download their free POD software, then send a digital file to have them print anywhere from twenty-five to 5,000 books.

[www.isbn.org](http://www.isbn.org)

An online source for applying for an International Standard Book Number prefix and a bar code. You can also write to ISBN–U.S. Agency, 630 Central Ave., New Providence, NJ 07974, or call (877) 310-7333.

[www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)

The legendary literary magazine’s online version.

[www.published.com](http://www.published.com)

The online resource for independent publishing.

[www.rejectioncollection.com](http://www.rejectioncollection.com)

Take heart from hearing how other authors—including many famous ones—have dealt with having work rejected and gone on to success.

<http://thesaurus.reference.com> and <http://dictionary.reference.com>

Online sources of synonyms and definitions.

[www.thewritermama.com](http://www.thewritermama.com)

Writing-related columns by experts, an online community for moms who write, online workshops.

[www.write4kids.com](http://www.write4kids.com)

Information on many aspects of writing and publishing books for children from the *Children’s Book Insider* , a newsletter for children’s writers.

[www.writersdigest.com](http://www.writersdigest.com)

The website for the world’s largest writers’ magazine; provides writers’ guidelines, market updates, classes, contests, conference lists, and more.

[www.writersmarket.com](http://www.writersmarket.com)

A comprehensive database of markets that purchase articles, personal essays, and short stories.

## **Writing Programs**

**Associated Writing Programs**

Mail Stop 1E3

George Mason University

Fairfax, VA 22030-4444

**703-993-4301**

[www.awpwriter.org](http://www.awpwriter.org)

Funded in 1967 by fifteen writers, this organization now serves 20,000 writers through 320 college and university creative writing programs and sixty writers' conferences and centers in the United States, Canada, and the UK.

**Gotham Writers' Workshop**

555 Eighth Ave., Suite 1402

New York, NY 10018

**212-974-8377 or 877-974-8377**

[www.writingclasses.com](http://www.writingclasses.com) (online writing courses)

New York City's largest private creative writing school offers ten-week classes and workshops on the premises, in exotic locations, and online. Includes screenwriting and songwriting classes.

**Writers Online Workshops**



**4700 East Galbraith Road**

Cincinnati, OH 45236

**513-531-2690, ext 11330, or 800-759-0963**

[www.writersonlineworkshops.com](http://www.writersonlineworkshops.com)

*Writer's Digest*, the world's largest writers' magazine, provides online workshops for writers that focus on business writing, children's writing, fiction, poetry, magazines, nonfiction, short stories, and more.

## **Writers' Workshops and Colonies**

For a complete listing of upcoming conferences and workshops, see current writers' magazines, the Association Writers & Writing Programs' Directory of Conferences and Centers (see "Writing Programs," above), or the ShawGuides, which also provide information on writing colonies:

**ShawGuides, Inc.**

P. O. Box 231295, Ansonia Station

New York, NY 10023

**212-799-6464**

[www.shawguides.com](http://www.shawguides.com)

**Byrdcliffe Arts Colony**

**34 Tinker Street**

Woodstock, NY 12498

**845-679-2079**

[www.woodstockguild.org](http://www.woodstockguild.org)

**Djerassi Resident Artists Program**

**2325 Bear Gulch Road**

Woodside, CA 94062-4405

**650-747-1250**

[www.djerassi.org](http://www.djerassi.org)

**Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico**

P. O. Box 1891

Taos, NM 87571

**575-758-2413**

[www.wurlitzerfoundation.org](http://www.wurlitzerfoundation.org)

**HillHouse Farms**



**894 Odd Fellows Hall Road**

Pulaski, TN 38478

**931-424-9029**

[www.hillhousewriters.com](http://www.hillhousewriters.com)

**MacDowell Colony**

**100 High Street**

Peterborough, NH 03458

**603-924-3886**

[www.macdowellcolony.org](http://www.macdowellcolony.org)

**Ragdale Foundation**

**1260 North Green Bay Road**

Lake Forest, IL 60045

**847-234-1063**

[www.ragdale.org](http://www.ragdale.org)

**Ucross Foundation**

## **30 Big Red Lane**

Clearmont, WY 82835

**307-737-2291**

[www.ucrossfoundation.org](http://www.ucrossfoundation.org)

**Writers' Colony at Dairy Hollow**



**515 Spring Street**

Eureka Springs, AR 72632

**479-253-7444**

[www.writerscolony.org](http://www.writerscolony.org)

**Yaddo**

P. O. Box 395—Union Avenue  
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866-0395

**518-584-0746**

[www.yaddo.org](http://www.yaddo.org)

## **Writing Guilds**

**The Authors Guild**

**31 East 32nd Street, 7th Floor**

New York, NY 10016

**212-563-5904**

[www.authorsguild.org](http://www.authorsguild.org)

The largest U.S. society of published authors. Provides industry news, copyright information, and assistance to members.

**Writers Guild of America**

**Writers Guild of America, West** (for writers living west of the Mississippi)

7000 W. Third Street

Los Angeles, CA 90048

**323-951-4000 or 800-548-4532**

[www.wga.org](http://www.wga.org)

**Writers Guild of America, East** (for writers living east of the Mississippi)

**555 West 57th Street, Suite 1230**

New York, NY 10019

**212-767-7800**

[www.wgae.org](http://www.wgae.org)

Represents published writers in motion pictures, broadcasting, cable, and new media. Provides an online mentoring service, script registration, lists of agents, industry news, and more.



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