Lawyers For The Talent

by

Richard Dooling

How Talk About Storytelling

By Richard Dooling

Here, I'll collect tips for studying and discussing the works we read. These include our discoveries during our gatherings, so if something is missing, and you'd like to add a short paragraph, please send it to me. Also, storytelling, especially for us, is accomplished by WRITING.

Aristotle said, "Excellence is a habit. We are what we do." Excellent readers and writers get that way by *doing* lots of reading and writing, our two main jobs in this course.

Our class-time together is to touch base and share the fruits of our adventures in reading and writing. The rest of the time we read and write.

To that end, several legendary authors have crafted rules for great writing and storytelling. I've collected my favorites in the sections following the discussion tips. And at bottom I've included some of my favorite writing and storytelling resources, websites and books.

Class Discussions

As above, most of our work is reading, writing, and thinking. For a mere two hours a week we gather and share insights and observations. So you should come prepared to talk about the story using some of the principles and techniques we've discovered in class and in our readings.

The Action-Idea

As Michael Tierno wrote in *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets From the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization*, great storytellers create a single unified action as a "through line," which becomes the story's subject. Then a hero takes the lead in that action, which has a "oneness" and connectivity so clear that Aristotle compares it to a statue.

Is that what happened in the story under discussion? Or did the work try too many things at once? Or maybe the *wrong* character ended up leading the action?

Consider the overall vision of the story? Is it worthy of our time and attention?

> A simple plot expressed as an ACTION-IDEA will galvanize your screenwriting, the way imagining your finished tree house will inspire you as you saw and chop wood. It's been said that the "whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Aristotle would agree, but he would remind us that "the whole is always in each of the parts."

Plot versus Story

Recall our opening salvo from Mr. King:

> Story is honorable and trustworthy; plot is shifty, and best kept under house arrest.

King elaborated on this notion in a different interview, when he said, "Forget plot, but remember the importance of 'situation' ":

> I won't try to convince you that I've never plotted any more than I'd try to convince you that I've never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible. I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible.
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> A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a What-if question:
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> - What if vampires invaded a small New England village? (Salem's Lot).

- What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (Cujo).

See if you can identify portions of the story where plot got the upper hand. Billy Wilder expressed the same fondness for *situations* when he observed:

An actor entering through the door, you've got nothing. But if he enters through the window, you've got a situation.

Both King and Wilder seem to believe that the proper situation—could we substitute "set-up" or first act—will create a story that just about tells itself.

Characters

First, the Hero. As we learned, Aristotle believed dramatists must depict not merely life but the moral life of a hero. A good story concerns the hero's moral conflict that developed during the story's middle (second act).

For example, if we are discussing *Presumed Innocent*, ask what would Aristotle or Michael Tierno, author of *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets From the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization*, would say about Turow's creation Rusty Sabitch?

Show Don't Tell

Advice so common it's now a cliché second only to "write what you know," but an apprentice to the art of storytelling must know the difference between showing and telling, between plot and story, and between active and passive voice.

"You don't write about the horrors of war. No. You write about a kid's burnt socks lying in the road," says novelist-screenwriter Richard Price.

Or as the great Hollywood writer-director Billy Wilder put it in his advice to screenwriters: "Let the audience add up two plus two. They'll love you forever."

Or as Tierno, the screenwriter, advises: "A plot's power and emotional impact can't grow merely because a character talks about what's going on in the story."

Beginnings and Endings

Of acts, of scenes, of the story. Did the story begin at the right place? If it starts too early then we must wait too long for the good parts. If it starts too late then we might get too much backstory, flashback or voice-over, which distract or divert us from the seamless moving story we crave.

These movie terms have near equivalents in the world of prose, but small doses of these indirections (e.g. flashbacks) go a long way.

Building a story is a relentless series of beginnings and endings. Some filmmakers contend that every scene is a mini movie, with three acts. And story structure means arranging about forty of these three-minute mini movies into one satisfying 120 minute feature film.

As for crafting individual scenes in books or movies, sometimes it pays to startle the reader or the audience by coming into a scene long after it began, in effect skipping way ahead without warning.

Recall the original *Hangover,* especially the morning after scene. We suddenly wake up in a trashed hotel room surrounded by fallout from epic debauchery: A chicken. Broken furniture, screens and mirrors. A tiger in the bathroom. The dentist can't remember having his tooth pulled. Bodies strewn everywhere. Watch it here..

We are mortified and intrigued. We want to know how all this all happened. We become co-creators of the world created by the storytellers, in this case, the filmmakers. The storytellers collected and arranged the images, sounds, and words, all of which act on us like a stimulus, a Rorsarch Inkblot if you will, that triggers an emotional response in us.

Do The Pieces Fit?

Aristotle tells us that the story should be so tight that if you took away any one incident, the whole would literally collapse.

Though talking about sentences themselves at the time, William Strunk's advice about writing in general echoes this advice:

> Vigorous writing is concise. 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. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.
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> From The Elements of Style: Free 1918 Version has many revisions, most recently The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition 4th Edition (1999).

Writing and Storytelling Rules

Along the way, it never hurts to recall the advice imparted by the great authors and filmmakers who came before us.

Please consider the following notable collection of rules and writing tips:

Elmore Leonard

- Elmore Leonard's rules for writers.

The Economist

- The Economist's Style Guide, which leads off with George Orwell's Rules from his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*.

The Elements of Style

- The Elements of Style: Free 1918 Version has many revisions, most recently The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition 4th Edition (1999).

Stephen King

Stephen King prefers to spend his days writing and reading, but sometimes you can get him to talk about storytelling: * 36 KILLER WRITING TIPS FROM STEPHEN KING * Stephen King On How To Write

George Orwell, *Politics & The English Language*

Orwell, the author of *1984* and *Animal Farm* and many others, advised as follows:

A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:

1. What am I trying to say?
2. What words will express it?
3. What image or idiom will make it clearer?
4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

1. Could I put it more shortly?
2. Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

One can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

From Orwell's essay *Politics and the English Language*.

BILLY WILDER'S advice to screenwriters

A writer/director and master of storytelling with a camera. *Some Like It Hot*, *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Blvd*, *The Apartment*, and many others. Classics.

1. The audience is fickle.
2. Grab 'em by the throat and never let 'em go.
3. Develop a clean line of action for your leading character.
4. Know where you're going.
5. The more subtle and elegant you are in hiding your plot points, the better you are as a writer.
6. If you have a problem with the third act, the real problem is in the first act.
7. A tip from Lubitsch:: Let the audience add up two plus two. They'll love you forever.
8. In doing voice-overs, be careful not to describe what the audience already sees. Add to what they're seeing.
9. The event that occurs at the second act curtain triggers the end of the movie.
10. The third act must build, build, build in tempo and action until the last event, and then—that's it. Don't hang around.

From Cameron Crowe's Conversations With Billy Wilder Advice For Screenwriters

An actor entering through the door, you've got nothing. But if he enters through the window, you've got a situation.

–Billy Wilder

Zadie Smith's Rules of Writing

Zadie Smith's 10 Rules of Writing.

1. When still a child, make sure you read a lot of books. Spend more time doing this than anything else.
2. When an adult, try to read your own work as a stranger would read it, or even better, as an enemy would.
3. Don't romanticise your 'vocation.' You can either write good sentences or you can't. There is no 'writer's lifestyle.' All that matters is what you leave on the page.
4. Avoid your weaknesses. But do this without telling yourself that the things you can't do aren't worth doing. Don't mask self-doubt with contempt.
5. Leave a decent space of time between writing something and editing it.
6. Avoid cliques, gangs, groups. The presence of a crowd won't make your writing any better than it is.
7. Work on a computer that is disconnected from the Internet.
8. Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you.
9. Don't confuse honours with achievement.
10. Tell the truth through whichever veil comes to hand — but tell it. Resign yourself to the lifelong sadness that comes from never being satisfied.

    Zadie Smith's 10 Rules of Writing.

Neil Gaiman's Rules of Writing

Neil Gaiman's Rules of Writing.

1. Write
2. Put one word after another. Find the right word, put it down.
3. Finish what you're writing. Whatever you have to do to finish it, finish it.
4. Put it aside. Read it pretending you've never read it before. Show it to friends whose opinion you respect and who like the kind of thing that this is.
5. Remember: when people tell you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.
6. Fix it. Remember that, sooner or later, before it ever reaches perfection, you will have to let it go and move on and start to write the next thing. Perfection is like chasing the horizon. Keep moving.
7. Laugh at your own jokes.

8. The main rule of writing is that if you do it with enough assurance and confidence, you're allowed to do whatever you like. (That may be a rule for life as well as for writing. But it's definitely true for writing.) So write your story as it needs to be written. Write it honestly, and tell it as best you can. I'm not sure that there are any other rules. Not ones that matter.

   Neil Gaiman's Rules of Writing.

Email on Thomas Healy's THE GREAT DISSENT

11-Oct-2015

Dear Story People

As we enjoy the fine prose in this book, you may want to experiment with reading some of Holmes' great paragraphs aloud. He writes with such rhythm and grandeur that his finer paragraphs sound like Shakespeare or Melville. Remember how different the Declaration of Independence sounded when read aloud by great actors? So find a quiet room of your own and try reading some Holmes aloud.

Most lawyers and judges don't bother to attempt truly great writing. Rewriting sentences is time-consuming intellectual hard labor, and it's a rare client who is willing to pay for the masterpiece memo in support of defendant's summary judgment motion. But some do.

In federal court at least and in many state courts, all motions and memoranda in support must now be in writing. No more lawyers arguing oral motions and joshing with the judge. The clerk and her judge see only written memoranda from lawyers. What are memoranda? Stories. Legal and otherwise. Lawyers get paid to tell their client's story. And nowadays that means WRITE their client's story.

In the GREAT DISSENT Healy tells us the story of Holmes and the First Amendment. You seldom see great prose like this from an academic, so enjoy, because it's an easy entertaining way to learn a lot about the First Amendment, too.

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From Cameron Crowe's Conversations With Billy Wilder Advice For Screenwriters

- Another famous Billy Wilder interview with James Linville in The Paris Review: The Art of Screenwriting No. 1.