The 7 Critical Elements Of A Great Book

My appraisals were based on the basic elements of good novel writing, which are:

1. Plot

Does the novel have a plot? Without a plot it is difficult to keep a reader interested. A plot involves a protagonist with a worthy story goal. [Read The Story Goal – The Key To Creating A Solid Plot Structure]

Is this goal strong enough to sustain an 80 000-word long novel? We prefer to read about characters who have something to fight for and something to lose if they don’t. [Read 5 Criteria For Creating Successful Story Goals]

Is the plot introduced early enough? The story goal is usually set by an inciting moment that turns the protagonist’s life upside down in a negative way.

Is there too much backstory? Readers are not interested in the detailed biography of your character. For the most part, they do not enjoy prologues. [Read Why Backstory Should Be The Scar Tissue Of Your Book]

Is there opposition for the protagonist? Conflict is created when an antagonist is introduced to stop the protagonist from achieving the goal. [Read The Antagonist As A Literary Device]

Does the plot make sense? If it does not, we tend to include things which seem to have no reason for being in the story. A good idea can turn into a maze of irritation if the author does not know where the story is headed.

Has the author used the setting to advance the plot? Descriptions should not be static or incidental. [Read 12 Crucial Things To Remember About Setting]

2. Characters

Do I care about what happens to the protagonist and the antagonist? If a reader fails to make me care for one of these characters, I will not carry on reading the book. Why should I? In William Nicholson‘s Shadowlands, C.S. Lewis says: ‘We read to know we are not alone.’ If I feel no connection with a character, I am alone, lost, adrift in the story. I do not have to sympathise with a character, but I need to care. [Read Make Me Care – 9 Ways To Ensure An Unforgettable Read]

Are the main characters believable? If the characters seem contrived or forced, we stop reading. I think a good way of looking at it is to ask: If I met these characters on the street (even if the story is set in a different universe) would they seem real? [Read The 4 Main Characters As Literary Devices]

Are their motivations believable? Give readers good reasons to buy into their story goals. For example, most of us would not ruin our lives to wreak revenge without a great reason.

Is the author masquerading as the protagonist? Many first time writers want to write their own stories, but don’t want to write a memoir. They try to turn their experience into a novel. This becomes problematic because they are too close to the story and they cannot see the character objectively.

Does the name suit the character? Sometimes you read a book and you feel as if the author has not thought this through. The name may be out of date or too strange for the world the character inhabits. Here are 10 Things To Consider When Naming Characters

Does their body language, clothing, hairstyle suit them? Sometimes it’s a good thing to suggest that a writer completes a character questionnaire so that the characters seem authentic. How a character moves, how he or she reacts with non-verbal responses show that the writer has treated the character like a real person. This cheat sheet for writing body language will help you.

Do their emotions fit? A character may be happy, sad, fearful, or infuriated. A good writer knows how to show these emotions in the things the characters say and do. This needs to be filtered into the story in a believable way.

Do the characters fit into their surroundings? Alternatively, do they fail to fit in because of who they are? [Read 5 Ways Setting Affects Your Characters]

Has the author used contrived ways to describe the characters? It is off-putting if a writer describes the character in detail. For example, ‘She had blue eyes, brown hair, stained teeth, and she weighed 60 kilos.’ A good writer will let this filter through and leave some of it to the reader’s imagination. [Read 5 Simple Ways To Describe Characters]

3. Viewpoint

Has the writer chosen a viewpoint that suits the story? Most stories are written in third person past tense. For example, ‘He cradled the baby as Freda screamed.’ Most genre novels are written in this viewpoint. Memoirs are often written in first person present tense to make the writing feel authentic and immediate. For example, ‘I cradle the baby as Freda screams.’ [Read 10 Ways To Tell A Story – All About Viewpoint]

Has the author chosen the correct character to tell the story? This happens mostly when we choose to tell the story through the eyes of the protagonist’s friend or confidant. This often makes the story sound forced because the friend cannot know what the character is truly feeling or thinking. It distances the most important character from the reader and there is more telling than showing as a result.

Has the author stayed in the viewpoint character’s head? Many beginner writers head-hop between the different characters in a scene, and confuse readers. As a rule, you should only use one viewpoint per scene. [Read 6 Simple Ways To Handle Viewpoint Changes]

Has the character revealed something he or she could not have known? There has to be consistency and a sense of continuity in storytelling.

If the author chooses a first person narrator, is the character strong enough to bear the weight of a 360-page book? This might seem like common sense, but it’s a tough ask for one character who has to be interesting enough not to bore a reader. The character could be compromised, which is fine if you are considering using an unreliable narrator.

Has the author chosen an omniscient narrator? This is so old-fashioned that it takes a truly exceptional writer to make this work. Modern readers prefer to be closer to the characters they are following in stories.

4. Dialogue

Is there enough dialogue in the book? I believe the book should have at least 50% of its pages filled with characters communicating. Being stuck in a character’s thought processes is agonising for long periods of time. Many beginner writers make this mistake, thinking that we will be intrigued. But it actually turns out to be the author who is stuck, trying to work through the fact that he or she does not really have a plot.

Is the dialogue appropriate for the characters? Are you giving the characters the correct vocabulary and tone? Do their words suit them? [Read 10 Dialogue Errors To Avoid At All Costs]

Do the characters sound too similar? This is a common problem for beginners. They use sentence structures and lengths that are the same for each character. Real people have distinct voices when they speak.

Does the dialogue serve a purpose? Writers who include unnecessary conversations also have problems with plotting. All the dialogue in a book should move the plot forward, introduce conflict, or show us something about a character. [Read 10 Ways to Introduce Conflict in Dialogue]

Have they included body language with dialogue? Real people do things while they’re talking. Here are some examples: 60 Things For Your Characters To Do When They Talk Or Think Including body language is one of the most important elements of a great book.

Are the dialogue tags good? ‘Said’ is the best tag you can use. The way characters say things and the words they choose should tell the reader how they say it. I am annoyed when characters hiss, spit, cajole, ejaculate and sputter.

5. Pacing

Does the pace suit the story? Books are made up of scenes and sequels. Scenes are faster than sequels and there are more of them. They are also longer. A good writer knows how to mix these up and how to get a rhythm that works for a story.

Does the pace suit the genre? Thrillers will have more scenes. Literary novels are more leisurely and they will have more sequels.

Is it too fast or too slow, and if it is, can it be fixed? Read The 4 Most Important Things To Remember About Pacing for excellent tips on how to improve problems with pacing.

6. Style

Does the writer have a distinctive, engaging style? You can tell if a writer has this even if the grammar and spelling isn’t perfect. [Read 7 Choices That Affect A Writer’s Style]

Can the writer write? Sometimes there are real problems with sentence structure, punctuation, and a poor grasp of storytelling techniques.

Is there too much passive voice in the story? This leads to telling instead of showing and drags a story down with it. [Read The Passive Voice Explained]

Is the tone appropriate for the story? A sombre tone is inappropriate for a light-hearted romance and a flippant tone is unusual in literary fiction.

Are the readability statistics acceptable for a novel? I work on the assumption that a good book will have an 80% readability value. Novelists need to learn how to write difficult things in the simplest way. [For more, read Why You Should Care About Readability Statistics]

Does the writer have an engaging voice? The best way to find your voice and nurture your style is to write. If you are struggling, read this post for help: How do you find your writing voice?

7. Beginnings, Middles, Endings

Does the story start at the beginning? A beginning is a delicate thing. There should be enough action combined with a touch of description, a hint of backstory, and dialogue – if necessary. Is the hook good enough to make the reader turn the page?

Is there a great inciting moment? I want to be invested in the story from the moment I pick up the book. There should be something to make me care. [Read The Importance of Inciting Moments] This is one of the most important elements of a great book.

Am I entertained through a muddle in the middle? Is there enough suspense, tension, and conflict to keep the story going? Good writers make the middle work by setting a deadline for a character. They force the character to change, throw in secrets, surprises and even add a dangerous twist. [Read A Tense Situation – Five Tips To Help You Write A Gripping Read]

Does the ending satisfy me? A great ending always completes your story arc, shows a change in your main character, and leaves the reader wanting more. [For more help, read: The Sense Of An Ending – How To End Your Book]

Does it fulfil the book’s promise? Avoid surprise endings and contrived twists. Rather go back and fix the parts of the book that should have been set up properly to support the ending you want. [Read How To Write A Beginning And An Ending That Readers Will Never Forget]

In the end…

If these elements of a great book are covered, and if they work, I find that a book delivers. The author naturally shows me the story instead of telling me what I should think or feel. I also find that a theme is revealed naturally with great plotting and good characterisation.