# Writing Fiction: A Beginner's Guide

## Part 1: How to Use this Guide

### Introduction

Fiction can be described as the art of making things up with words in a prose narrative. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (compare prices) describes it as "literature, esp. novels, describing imaginary events and people." But writing fiction isn't quite as simple as just making things up or imagining things and writing them down. Like all kinds of writing, fiction has rules, or at least guidelines and conventions. Understanding how fiction works can go a long way towards knowing how to make your own writing better.

There are many people who believe that writing can't be taught. I don't agree, or rather, I only partly agree. My formula for good writing (or art) is this:

**art = talent + craft**

The talent part of the equation is the part that can't be learned (or taught). You've either got talent or you don't (but before you give up in despair, realize that you may simply not have discovered your talent yet; for example, someone may have very little talent for fiction, but a great deal of talent for poetry). Talent in writing is like genius in science. You can't explain it, it's just there.

Fortunately, the craft part of the equation can be learned. This is the nuts and bolts of how writing works. Much of the craft of writing will be learned through trial and error. Reading the work of other writers and figuring out how they did things will also help you learn. But there are some general principles of writing that can be described and understood. It is those principles that this guide will address.

### What to Write About

Sometimes becoming a better writer involves figuring out what to write about. One of the best pieces of advice I was ever given is "write about what haunts you." What are the things you always want to read about? What topics would get you to watch a documentary on TV? What things do you think about, wonder about when you're alone? Are there images or themes that keep coming up in your dreams, the doodles you make in your notebooks, the examples you use when trying to explain things to other people? Those are the things you should write about. Write about topics that fascinate you or horrify you or delight you. Whatever you feel passionately about has the potential to be a good topic.

If you find yourself lacking ideas, read through Ideas and Where to Get Them to see if any of the suggestions are helpful. If ideas aren't the problem, but getting a story going is, try You've Got An Idea. Now What? There are also plenty of useful tips available on finding ideas and on getting started, submitted by readers of the teenwriting site.

### How to Use This Guide

I've attempted to arrange the sections of this guide in a logical and useful way, but the parts aren't meant to indicate the order in which things are tackled when writing. In fact, all of the elements of fiction that I will address are interrelated, and many of them happen at the same time as a writer writes. The major topics covered in the guide are:

- plot: the events that happen and how they are arranged
- setting: where things happen
- characters: the people in the story
- point of view and narrative voice: whose point of view the story is told from and the way the author chooses to tell it
- types of prose: exposition, dialogue and other kinds of writing and their uses
- scenes and half-scenes: when and how to dramatize the story
- form and structure: what shape the narrative has and how the pieces fit together
- types of story: stories can be about characters, ideas and other things
- genre: categories for fiction, including things like mysteries or fantasy or realism
- reading and revision: the importance of reading other people's work, and how to make yours better

The best way to use this guide, and others like it, is to read it all the way through once. You may want to take notes (either mentally or on paper) on anything you need to work on or that you hadn't really thought of before. Then go and write something, but don't come back to the guide (or even think about it) until you've finished a draft of whatever you're working on. Then, when you're at the revision stage, return to the guide and see if any of the elements discussed can help you improve your work.

Many of these topics will need to become incorporated into your unconscious mental processes before they're of much use. That will happen gradually if you refer to the guide (or any notes you made) every now and then as a refresher. Other topics will need to be more directly worked on (which ones will vary with the individual). Like so many things in writing, how **you** write is something you ultimately need to figure out for yourself.

## Plot - The Plot is Not the Story

In *A Passion for Narrative* (compare prices), Jack Hodgins defines plot as "a series of causally related events, involving some sort of conflict (or tension), leading (probably) to a climax and (possibly) to a resolution." So the plot of a story or novel is kind of the framework on which the other elements are built. That doesn't mean you need to work out the plot before you do anything else, though. Sometimes the plot emerges from the interaction of your characters in the situations you create. On the other hand, very plot-oriented stories, like murder mysteries, can benefit from having a clearly-drawn plot right from the beginning.

It's important to keep the terms *plot* and *story* distinct. *Story* can be used to refer to the piece of writing you're working on, as in "the story I wrote is very long." In this sense, *story* is kind of shorthand for *short story*; you could also use the word *piece*

instead. More significantly, *story* is the sequence of events in the piece, in the order they occur. *Plot*, then, is the sequence of events as the author arranges them. In other words, the events as laid out in the plot may not be revealed in the same order they happened in the story. This is because writers use devices like flashbacks, characters filling each other in on events, flashforwards and "meanwhile" to reveal occurrences to the reader.

Orson Scott Card, in his book *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (compare prices), refers to a similar distinction when he talks about the *myth* of the story versus the *text* of the story. The *myth* is a simple description of what happened and why that begins long before the actual events of the piece and continues after. When you make a statement like "this novel is about . . . " you are most likely describing the myth of the story. The *text*, on the other hand, is what is actually there -- the printed story or novel.

**Genre Plots**

The plots of many genre novels are to some extent standardized. This is especially visible in mystery fiction, where a mystery must be introduced, clues found and the mystery solved. It would be difficult to write a satisfying murder mystery without keeping to at least the broad outlines of the mystery plot.

The plot of many genre stories (novels, especially) can be divided into certain elements:

- a main character is introduced for the reader to identify with
- this main character has a strong goal to strive for
- obstacles are introduced, often by the actions of an antagonist
- the reactions of the main character are a direct result of the obstacles, and new obstacles arise as a result of those reactions (and so on)
- the conflict or tension increases until a climax is reached -- the main character does or does not deal with the events; whatever the result, the main character's life is changed
- the story is brought to a satisfying resolution

There is, of course, the danger that adhering too closely to a genre plot can result in a cliché piece of fiction. One way to avoid that danger is to forget about plot altogether while you are writing, but return to the principles of plotting once you have a draft and are ready to being revising. Problems in plot can often be resolved by breaking the piece up into the individual plot elements and examining how those elements fit together. Where the plot diverges most suddenly from the genre plot outline is the fist place to look for things that aren't working.

**Leading and Being Led**

Some writers always write with a detailed plot outline already worked out, while others prefer to just start writing and see what happens. You'll need to find out what works best for you, but there are some basic strategies that almost all writers use.

One way to think of writing and plotting is by comparing writing to walking a dog. You, the writer, are the dog-walker; the piece you're working on is the dog. The plot is the route you plan to follow. While walking your dog, you usually want to have some general idea of where you're going. Even if your plan is to explore and see what you find, you need a direction to go to avoid getting completely lost. When you walk your dog, you don't want him to drag you around wherever he feels like going; you should be in control. You decide where to go and when. But sometimes when your dog wants to go off on a deer path into the woods there could be something wonderful waiting to be found. In those cases, you want to let the dog lead you for a while. You still need to take care, though, since your dog might suddenly leap off a cliff and drag you along.

So what does this mean for writing? It means you should be in control of your story, but not in such strict control that you miss out on all the wonderful discoveries you might have made if you relaxed and let the work generate its own plot for a while. It means that even if you want to just write and see where you end up you should have some end or goal or major event in mind so you don't end up going nowhere. And it means that if you let your story go where it will you'll sometimes get wonderful material and you'll sometimes end up with nothing good. It's lucky for the writer, though, that if your story leads you into a plot dead-end, you can back up and start again from the point it went astray; the poor dog-walker can't rewind from begin dragged off a cliff.

**Crisis versus Challenge**

In *Worlds of Wonder* (compare prices), David Gerrold observes that there are two kinds of problems you can have your characters face. Since plot often arises from characters dealing with problems (usually with the biggest problem they've ever had) the distinction between the two types can be useful to consider.

The first type of problem is the crisis. A crisis is a situation that a character finds themself in, but did not choose. Crises have to be dealt with immediately, meaning there is a deadline involved, giving the crisis a built-in means for increasing tension in a story. The crisis demands action.

The challenge is the other type of problem. It is a problem that a character creates for themself because they find the possibility exciting or interesting. A challenge usually has a character attempting to find, discover, build or create something, and is a way of expressing the character's essence and what is meaningful to them. The crisis and the challenge can also be combined; for example a general crisis could arise (a threat to society, perhaps) that the character chooses to take on even though they aren't required to do so.

**Ask Not What You Can do for Your Plot**

Like any other element in writing, the plot has a purpose; it has functions to perform, or else what would be the point in bothering with it? Some of the things a plot can do for a reader are:

- concentrate on an interesting character or characters
- concentrate on the most significant part of the characters' lives

- give those characters motivations and the means to have an effect on events
- cause the reader to feel that events are connected (causally or thematically) and not random
- begin the story right when the status quo (or the ordinary life of the character(s)) is threatened
- reveal events and the implications of events to create tension and a desire in the reader to know what happens
- keep the reader's interest in the goal and emotional involvement in events as they happen
- maintain interest in the middle of the story, and not just in the exciting beginning and satisfying end
- come to a climax -- the point where conflicting forces meet and promise to relieve the tension for the reader
- give an insight or understanding that releases the reader from involvement; the end releases tension and satisfies the need or solves the problem set up at the beginning
- cause the reader to continue to think about the story, though it does not require the reader to go on reading once the satisfying end had been achieved

**Head for the Mountain**

The functions of the plot as outlined above aren't really things you want to think about *while* you're writing. What you do want to think about is where the plot is going to end up -- what point you're aiming for. You don't necessarily have to know the end or conclusion, though some writers do like to know how a story ends before beginning to write. But having some event that you know is going to be significant gives you a point to work towards as you write so you don't end up feeling like you're heading nowhere. If you know that climbing a mountain is going to be a life-changing event for your character, whatever other events come up along the way you still know to head for the mountain.

Probably the most important thing to remember about plot is that it is *causally* connected. Every event arises from the events that happened before, so that, even if the reader doesn't expect something to happen it, seems inevitable when it does happen.

## Settings - Place

Setting is one of the most neglected aspects of fiction; after all, it is merely where the story takes place, right? Right. But every aspect of writing should be carefully considered by the serious writer, in order to take full advantage of it. And setting is a tool a writer can use to great effect.

Because we are trying to convince a reader that our story really happened -- at least for as long as it takes them to read the thing -- having a convincing place for the story to happen **in** is vital. And consider how differently an deathbed scene would read if it happened in a stark, sterile hospital room compared to a lushly appointed bedroom full of warm candlelight with the smell of baking bread wafting in through the door. The words and actions and characters present could be exactly the same, but the scene becomes very different when it happens in different settings.

## Time

Time as an aspect of setting is something we sometimes overlook. But time is as important as place; New York of 2003 is a very different place from New York of 1723 or 3015. Different time periods have different looks and atmospheres, even if most of the buildings are the same. And even a few years can make a difference -- how has the New York of today changed from the New York of 2000? Not only has the landscape changed, but so has the feeling of being in that city.

Of course, what year it happens to be is not the only temporal aspect of setting to consider. How might the time of year change both the physical setting (snow, ice, less colour in the landscape) and the atmosphere (more people are depressed in the winter)? And what about the time of day? Even if it is not necessary to specify these things in the text of your story, you as the writer ought to know. These questions will affect the details you include in your descriptions, the behaviour or mood of your characters and various other things. Always consider what the time you've chosen *means*; what things result from it being that time and not some other time.

## Setting is More Than a Place to Happen

The most obvious function of setting is to give your story a place to happen. All settings do that. But we already have some hints about other possible things a setting can do. Remember the difference between the deathbed scenes in a hospital room and a bedroom? Those settings are doing more than providing a location for events. They are adding atmosphere and mood, they are affecting the characters and maybe even influencing events. Setting can be subtle, but also quite powerful.

## The Implications of Invented Settings

If you are writing fantasy or science fiction, you are probably going to be using invented settings, or imaginary worlds, at some point. For more information on worldbuilding in fantasy and SF, see the article Do-It-Yourself Setting. Because you've made everything up, you have a special task to make sure all aspects of your setting make sense and to consider all the implications of your imaginary world. For example, if you've chosen to give your world a red sun, what might this mean to the people living on the world? For science fiction, you have to consider what a red sun is in astronomical terms and how it would affect the planets and creatures orbiting it. For fantasy you can be a little more playful, but you still need to think things through. How might a red sun affect the way people see colour, for example? What magical or fantastical aspects might a red sun have? Would the colour red come to have some special significance, perhaps?

In his book *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* (compare prices), Crawford Kilian suggests that writers should think about the metaphorical implications that their choice of setting will have. He divides settings into two broad categories: demonic and paradisal. The idea is that a story about a world that is a metaphorical paradise being threatened by a world that is a metaphorical hell has a very different meaning from a story about a demonic, hellish world that is being turned into a paradise. Even if the basic action and plotlines of these two scenarios were essentially the same, the stories would have very different meanings, and what meaning a reader takes from them would largely come from what kind of settings are used. This is only one example of the metaphorical possibilities of created worlds. Can you think of

others? If you are going to use invented settings, you should be able to think of many other ways to manipulate the "meaning" of a story by changing the setting in this way.

**Possible Functions of Settings**

Jack Hodgins lists seven roles for settings in his book *A Passion for Narrative* (compare prices). Each makes more use of setting than the last, and the final role is truly the most memorable when it is used by a capable writer.

*Generic*: The setting is without unique features, implying that the story could happen anywhere. The problem with this is that all real places have their own cultural and physical characteristics and these characteristics influence characters. A generic setting will not seem real and may actually detract from the story.

*Backdrop*: The setting merely provides us with a way of knowing where we are and, though it may have unique characteristics, it does not affect the characters or action. It is a place, but it doesn't do anything.

*Local Colour*: The story is flavoured by attention to the unique details of the setting, which may give the impression that the story could not have happened anywhere else. The writer may be tempted to make the setting entertaining without really giving it any significance.

*Atmosphere/Mood*: Setting can be used to set the mood or atmosphere for the whole story or novel. In addition, the settings of individual scenes may reflect the state of mind of the characters. For more information on ways the achieve this, see Get Moody: Evoking Atmosphere in Your Writing.

*Affects Action and Character*: Characters are more real if they have a historical and geographical context; the place where a person grew up will affect their attitudes and behaviour for their whole lives. For example, someone raised in a big city will think and act differently from someone raised in a tiny rural village.

*Place as Character*: One example of this is in the old "man versus nature" plot, where the main struggles the protagonist faces are with the environment. In this situation, the setting itself is the antagonist. In stories of this sort, changing elements of the setting would change the entire story. Can you imagine a story about a woman's struggle to climb a mountain unaided being set on the prairies? That story wouldn't work without a mountain, and so the mountain becomes a central character. The story's plot, then, is largely determined by its setting.

*Metaphor/Symbol*: The setting becomes symbolic of the theme of the story.

You don't want to spend too much time at first on figuring out exactly how your setting will function in your work. As long as you are aware of the possibilities offered by setting, you'll probably find that you can ignore the technical details while writing a draft or your story or novel. Things like atmosphere and metaphor often emerge spontaneously in the writing, which means you only have to decide what works and what doesn't when you edit. Don't force a role on a setting, but use your editing to make it stronger.

# Characters - Where Do Characters Come From?

Characters can be found just about anywhere, but they tend to come about in three ways:

- they come from within: they grow from a fragment of the writer's own personality
- they are observed: characters can be built from bits and piece of assorted real people
- they arrive: characters may appear fully-formed in the writer's head

Generally you don't want to use an entire real person as a character. This is partly because the person might recognize themself and become angry with you (you may find this happening even when you only use a small part of a real person). Another reason is that real things often seem unbelievable or implausible in fiction, even if they are true. In fiction we're not aiming for the actual, but for the seeming of reality, which is strangely quite a different thing. I once tried to use someone I knew quite well as a character in a novel, and when I re-read what I'd written -- after carefully describing some actual things they did and said -- the character seemed a complete caricature and nothing like a real person at all. It wasn't due to my lack of skill, either -- I had some mutual acquaintances read the piece and they agreed I had captured the person dead-on -- it was just that reality does not often translate well into fiction. Fiction is *art* after all, and from art comes *artifice* (and *artificial*).

Discovering who your characters are is a fascinating process. You eventually want your characters, as Jack Hodgins says, to "sit up and start breathing on their own." Finding the right name helps. A name should be the essence of who a character is. It can have symbolic connections, as well. For some help with names, see The Meaning in Names: A Character Exercise and the Character Naming Links.

Other things to consider when creating or discovering characters are appearance, tastes, clothes, age, social standing, religion, and whatever else you can think of. "Accumulated information that is merely gathered data rarely brings a character to life," says Jack Hodgins, and that is true. Most of the details you think up won't make it into your story, either, but it is important for *you* to know them -- the better you know your characters the easier it will be to bring them to life on the page. The most important thing to know about a character is their goals -- their motivations. Knowing why they do what they do will help you figure out how they will react in any given situation. And, most importantly, it is the characters' motivations that drive the plot.

### Whose Story is It?

Although the hero of the story is the person the readers root for, he/she may not be who the story is *about* (of course, the story *could* be about the hero, it just isn't always). As Orson Scott Card says, the main character is the one who makes everything happen, the person who drives the immediate action. In fact the main character could even be an anti-hero or villain. We pity them or sympathize with them, but don't actually want them to win.

This may seem a bit confusing. Just remember that the protagonist, or the hero, is the person we want to win -- the good guy. The main character is the person that the story is actually about; it is their life we follow most closely in the story.

To help clear things up little, remember also that the main character should be two things:

- the person who hurts the most
- someone with the power and freedom to act (though they may not know they have it)

To figure out who should be the main character in your story, ask yourself, "Who is hurt in this situation?" (especially "Who is hurt the most?") and "Why are they hurt?" As David Gerrold says, "If [the main character] doesn't hurt, why should we care?" We find out who the character is most clearly when they are hurt. That is what will hold a reader and make them believe your characters are real (at least for as long as they are reading your work).

**Viewpoint Character**

The viewpoint character is the person through whose eyes we see the story. This may or may not be the same as the main character, and in a longer work such as a novel, there may be more than one viewpoint character. We will explore the idea of viewpoint in more detail in Part 5: Point of View and Narrative Voice. For discussions of other kinds of characters, see the Glossary definitions for character (this also talks about *flat* and *round* characters), protagonist, and antagonist.

**Building Character**

Once you know who your characters are, you then have to figure out ways to introduce them to your readers. There are four main ways to show character in fiction:

**1.** *Tell the reader*: This is the easiest way of showing character, but your reader won't necessarily believe you (who believes everything they are told?). And even if they do believe you, this kind of character description is easy to forget.

The warning had come and she had accepted it. She was used to waiting. Perversity, endurance, and guile were her other weapons, loaded with the inexhaustible patience of vengeful dedication. (from *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey)

**2.** *Have the character tell the reader*: This is usually a substitute for #1 in stories told in first person (see Part 5 for more on point of view), but can also be done in a third person story through the character's thoughts.

The warning had come and I had accepted it. I was used to waiting. Perversity, endurance and guile were my other weapons, loaded with the inexhaustible patience of vengeful dedication. (re-written from *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey)

**3.** *Have other characters tell the reader*: This is usually done by having other characters speaking to each other about the character in question. If you are using a shifting viewpoint (see Part 5), you can also have various characters express their opinions (through thoughts or dialogue) while they are the viewpoint character.

"He's considered a vicious fighter," F'nor advised, his smile gone. (from *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey)

**4.** *Use the character's actions*: This is probably the strongest and most believable means of depicting character available to a writer. The reader won't believe everything they are told, but they will believe it if they "see" it.

He left his partner chattering to thin air and courteously extended his arm to the Lady Gemma to support her down the steps and to the table. (from *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey)
There are also other techniques for evoking character:

*Body language*: This is especially effective when described using strong, active verbs.

Fax sliced and speared meat, occasionally bursting out with a louder bark of laughter as his thoughts amused him. F'lar sauntered down to the carcass and, without waiting for invitation from his host, began to carve neat slices also, beckoning his men over. (from *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey)
*Emotions*: Emotions can be shown through physical evidence such as twitching or sweating, facial expressions, stream-of-consciousness thoughts, dialogue and more.
Fax erupted into action. He leaped across the intervening space, bellowing denials of the news. Before Lessa could dodge, his fished crashed down across her face. F'lar's lips tightened to a thinner line.(from *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey)
*Dialogue*: What people say can be very revealing of character, perhaps nearly as effective as what people do.
" . . . laughed at we were, good F'lar," Tillarek was saying, moistening his throat with a generous gulp of Weyr-made wine, "for doing as men ought." (from *Dragonflight* by Anne McCaffrey)
You will use all of these techniques at some point. In fact you'll often combine more than one in the same paragraph, or even the same sentence, as you can see from the examples above. The important thing to be aware of the possibilities and decide which technique would work best, given the situation and the information you are trying to convey.

Now that you know how to express your characters, you'll need to figure out which one of them is going to tell your story . . .

## Point of view and narrative voice - Seeing and Speaking

When you've got an idea for a story, a few characters, an idea of the plot maybe, you have to figure out who is going to tell it. This is where point of view comes in. The point of view in fiction determines whose eyes the reader experiences the story through. It can be a key choice, as different points of view have different strengths and weaknesses. Narrative voice is a related topic to think about, and especially important in third person stories. First person narratives already have a narrator built in; the narrative voice is the teller's voice. But how do you tell a third person narrative? This part of the Beginner's Guide to Writing Fiction will explore these topics.

### Many Points of View

There are many points of view for a writer to choose from, and each has different problems, responsibilities and effects. Different writers have categorized them in different ways, but the system used in this article is fairly common. The available points of view are first, second and third person. Of these, second person is very uncommon, while first and third person each have three primary variants. As you

read through the descriptions and examples, think about how you might use each of them in your own fiction. Do you tend to write in first person? Third? Or do you sometimes switch point of view in the middle of a piece? Why do you think that is?

**The First Person**

A story written in the first person is told by an "I," where "I" can be the main character, a less important character witnessing events, or a person retelling a story they were told by someone else. This point of view is often effective in giving a sense of closeness to the character. It can be very easy to get the reader to identify or sympathize with your main character when the reader is seeing everything through that character's eyes.

There are some important things to consider when writing in first person, though. First of all, you need to decide how this story is being told. Is the character writing it down? Telling it out loud? Thinking it to their self? And if they *are* writing it down, is it something meant to be read by the public? Or is it a private diary? A story meant for one other person? The way the first person narrator is relating the story will affect how you write it, the language you choose, the length of your sentences, your tone of voice and many other things. The reader should have at least some sense of this as well. The way they interpret a story could be very different if it is told as a secret diary or if it is a public statement.

Another aspect to think about is how much time has elapsed between when the character experienced the events of the story and when they decided to tell them. If only a few days have passed, the story could be related very differently than if the character was reflecting on events of the distant past. Also think about *why* the character is telling the story. What is their motivation? Are they just trying to clear up events for their own peace of mind? Make a confession about a wrong they did? Or tell a good adventure tale to their beer-guzzling friends? The reason why a story is told will also affect how it is written, and you at least should know the answer, even if it never makes its way into the text. And not only *Why?* but *Why now?*

A first person narrative is often more effective when it is a first person narrator telling someone else's story (in other words, when the narrator is not the main character). This allows a certain distance between the narrator and the events which is impossible for the main character. On the other hand, the inability to see the bigger picture can sometimes be exploited to good effect. Whether or not your narrator is actually telling the truth is another big question (and one your readers will ask, so you'd best think about it, too).

*First Person Protagonist*: For this point of view, a character relates events that occurred to them; the "I" is the main character, telling her or his own story.

I missed the bus that morning because I couldn't convince myself to get out of bed. It was just too cosy under the comforter, with the cat curled up next to me. I was going to have to walk all the way to work.

*First Person Witness*: The story of the main character is told by another character observing the events.

She missed the bus. She'd probably spent an hour arguing with herself that she really should get up. I could picture her there, curled up in bed with the cat next to her. Now she was going to have to walk to work.

*First Person Re-teller*: The story is told, not by a witness to the events, but by someone who has heard the story from yet another person.

She missed the bus. I don't know why; probably couldn't get out of bed. You know how warm it gets when you're all curled up in the blankets. She had a cat, too, and somehow a cat makes it harder to get up in the morning. So she missed the bus, and would have to walk all the way to work.

**The Second Person**

In second person, the narrator addresses the protagonist as "you." Often, this kind of story has the narrator speaking to a younger version of their self. This point of view is very rare because it is extremely difficult to pull off. The reader may feel that *they* are the one spoken to, and will find it difficult to accept that they are doing the things the narrator tells them they are doing. If you choose to tell a story in second person, it is very important to make it clear to the reader who is being addressed, so they can trust in the teller and accept the story as given.

You missed the bus again because you just couldn't convince yourself to get out of bed. The comforter made a cosy nest around you, and there was the cat, a warm ball of fur curled next to you. So you had to walk all the way to work.

**The Third Person**

Characters are referred to as "he" and "she" in third person. In this case the narrator (who may be indistinguishable from the author) is not a character in the story. Depending on the type of third person point of view, the narrator may know -- and be able to tell about -- the thoughts and feelings of all characters, or only one character, or they may only be able to report what is seen or heard.

Sometimes a third person narrator requires the reader to accept the narrator's authority, which they may be hesitant to do. Just because a narrator sounds like they know it all, doesn't mean they do. This may be why the first person point of view has become more and more popular -- it can be harder to get the reader to identify with a nameless, third person teller. However, third person narration is very flexible and should not be discarded without thought. It is still the most common point of view, and for good reason.

When a writer is turning personal experiences into fiction, it is often easier to write in third person (even if they intend to put the final draft in first person). This is because the third person distances the reader (and the writer) from events. It is easier to write about personal things when you write as if they are happening to someone else. It is also easier to change events -- often necessary to turn reality into fiction -- when you aren't claiming that it was you who experienced them.

*Third Person Omniscient*: The narrator knows everything; all thoughts, feelings, and actions may be related to the reader (or they may be withheld).

She missed the bus. She spent nearly an hour arguing with herself about getting up. *You have to be awake now, it's a work day. But it's so warm. Just a few more minutes. You'll be late. I don't care. Yes you do.* Curled up there with the cat, it was so hard to move, so warm and cosy. And so she missed the bus, and swore, and told herself how stupid she was. Then she started the long walk to work.

*Third Person Objective*: The narrator can only relate to the reader what is seen or heard. A good writer can tell a completely objective story in such a way that the reader is able to determine the feelings and sometimes even the thoughts of the characters through what those characters say and do, even though the thoughts and feelings are never described.

She arrived panting at the bus stop when the bus was already long gone. She looked at her watch and swore. "Damn warm blankets," she said. "Damn warm, purring cat." She sighed and walked along the sidewalk in the direction of her office building.

*Third Person Limited*: The narrator is able to see into the mind of a single character. Sometimes the point of view may zoom in so close to that character that the narrator begins to use that character's manner of speech and thought, and sometimes the narrator may step back to take a more objective view. This point of view is sort of the "default" in fiction -- it is the most common because it can be used the most effectively in the majority of situations. If there is no reason not to use a third person limited point of view, then it is probably the best choice (but you will find it useful to experiment before choosing the point of view for any given story; third person limited may often work, but it isn't *always* the best point of view. Don't be afraid to use other points of view, just make sure you have a reason for your choice). In longer forms like novels, third person limited can be made even more effective by changing the character that the point of view is limited to. You must always be sure the reader knows when you have switched points of view and who you have changed to, however. If you are going to use shifting third person points of view, it is often best to change at a chapter or section break, at least until you are proficient enough at it that you won't lose your reader.

She arrived panting at the bus stop only to see a far-off glimpse of the back of the bus, moving quickly away. She glanced at her watch. It was already half past eight. "Damn warm blankets," she said, thinking of how it had felt to be curled up and warm in bed. She had argued with herself for an hour about how she should get going. She had stayed in bed so long she didn't even have time for a shower, and now she'd missed the bus. It was the warm cat curled up next to her that had made it so hard to get out of bed. "Damn warm, purring cat," she said, and headed along the sidewalk to work.

**Whose Voice?**

Now that you've seen the possibilities for who tells the story, what about how it's told? Narrative voice is not exactly the same thing as the writer's voice (as in "You need to find your voice"), though it can be. Narrative voice is another layer on the way a story is told. If you are writing in first person, for example, the narrative voice is the narrator's voice (which means it is not the voice of the writer, but the voice of a character) and involves the narrator's manner of speaking, word choice, dialect and so on. A third person story can also make use of a voice that is not the writer's -

- even though the narrator is not a character in the sense that they participate in the story, they can be a character in the sense that they are not the writer.

### "Natural" versus Masked Voice

A "natural" narrative voice is the writer's own voice, a voice that is as recognizable as a thumbprint to those that know what to look for. This is what people are referring to when they speak of "finding your voice" (thought it's really something you've already got or that you develop, rather than something you find). The writer may instead choose to hide their voice partially or completely behind a "mask" -- the voice of a narrating character (though in order for it to remain a third person story, the narrator remains outside the action).

### Tone

Tone of voice is something you'll have whether you use your natural voice or an adopted voice. It reflects an attitude towards events and the world in general, and will affect the reader's perceptions of the work. If you recognize how you feel about what you are writing, you will be able to exploit those feelings and that tone to add to your writing.

Experiment with point of view and narrative voice to see what things you can do with them. Finding the right point of view and the right voice for each individual piece of fiction is vital. Getting one of them wrong can result in a story that just doesn't quite work.

## Types of Prose

"Show, don't tell." That's what they always say. It makes you think that if you always show everything, your writing is sure to be perfect. On one hand, "Show, don't tell" is good advice. If you tell somebody something they may or may not believe you, but if you show it to them they pretty much have to believe. That's why showing a character doing something is much more effective than telling the reader that the character did something. But . . .

"There's always a 'but'." That's another phrase that comes up a lot. Showing is good, but not always. If you showed every smallest event that needs to happen for a story to work, you'd have a awfully long story, and your reader would probably get tired of it. There are times when you need to tell the reader something instead of showing them. That's why there are different types of prose you can use in your fiction. If you must show something, you use scenes and half scenes (discussed in Part 7), both of which make use of dialogue. But for those times you need to explain something or quickly summarize events for the reader you have exposition and narrative.

### Exposition

Exposition is any explanatory prose -- passages that explain, define, describe or comment on things. This kind of writing is used to convey necessary information that can't be worked into a scene (see Part 7 for more on scenes). A good writer can create passages of exposition that are enjoyable to read, but too much exposition rapidly becomes boring for the reader. In Science Fiction, long expository passages

that explain complex things all in one big lump are called "infodump" and are best avoided. Try to keep exposition short and concise and intersperse it with other types of prose to keep the work interesting.

The Theatre lay in a meadow called the Long Slip. A little mill-stream, carrying water to a mill two or three fields away, bent around one corner of it, and in the middle of the bend lay a large old Fairy Ring of darkened grass, which was the stage. The mill-stream banks, overgrown with willow, hazel, and guelder-rose, made convenient places to wait in till your turn came; and a grown-up who had seen it said that Shakespeare himself could not have imagined a more suitable setting for his play. (from *Puck of Pook's Hill* by Rudyard Kipling)

**Narrative**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines narrative as an "account of connected events in order of happening." In writing circles, it is often called *summary* narrative because the function of narrative is to summarize events that can't or shouldn't be dramatized as scenes (see Part 7). Sometimes the events simply aren't important enough to be written as scenes, but still contain necessary information; at other times we need to move from one scene to another without getting bogged down in the details of how. These are times when narrative is useful. It is important not to get carried away, however, as narrative is a quicker and much more shallow way to tell a story than scenes, and your readers may feels things are happening to quickly or without enough detail.

Their play went beautifully. Dan remembered all his parts -- Puck, Bottom, and the three Fairies -- and Una never forgot a word of Titania -- not even the difficult piece where she tells the Fairies how to feed Bottom with "apricocks, green figs, and dewberries," and all the lines end in "ies." They were both so pleased that they acted it three times over from beginning to end before they sat down in the unthistly centre of the Ring to eat eggs and Bath Olivers. This was when they heard a whistle among the alders on the bank, and they jumped. (from *Puck of Pook's Hill* by Rudyard Kipling)

**Dialogue**

Dialogue is "a conversation in written form" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). It is when characters speak to each other and their words are placed in quotation marks so the reader knows which words each character said. Dialogue can have many functions, and a good writer will try to give each piece of dialogue more than one function at a time, if possible. Some of the ways dialogue can be used are:

- to convey exposition -- in other words, to function the same way as expository prose, but with a character doing the explaining
- to show character -- see Part 4 for more on how dialogue can express character
- to convey sense of place and time -- by including specific phrases or words used in a particular time or place
- to develop conflict -- dialogue is a great way to have characters argue, express feelings and opinions and much more

It is vital to remember that, although dialogue represents speech, it is not real speech. Don't try to replicate the way people actually talk in your dialogue. To understand why, write down a conversation word for word and then read it over.

Real speech is boring. It's full of "um"s and "ah"s and all kinds of false starts, repetitions and really silly phrases (look out for those clichés!). Writing is art, and so we have to construct dialogue to give the illusion of speech while avoiding all the annoying aspects of actual conversation. Make your dialogue concise instead of rambling; avoid those false starts, repetition and unnecessary words and pauses; use standard spellings (for example, use "yeah" rather than "ya" "yeh" or "yah"); be very careful not to exaggerate dialect or non-standard speech (just the flavour of the way a person speaks is good; don't try to recreate their accent in phonetic spelling); and avoid too few, not enough or too strange dialogue tags (the "she said" part of dialogue). One way to keep dialogue interesting is to make action part of dialogue as well as speech: intersperse sentences describing what a character is doing as they speak.

"I'm rather out of practice," said he; "but that's the way my part ought to be played."

Still the children stared at him -- from his dark blue cap, like a big columbine flower, to his bare, hairy feet. At last he laughed.

"Please don't look at me like that. It isn't *my* fault. What else could you expect?" he said.

"We didn't expect anyone," Dan answered slowly. "This is our field."

"Is it?" said their visitor, sitting down. "Then what on Human Earth made you act *Midsummer Night's Dream* three times over, *on* Midsummer Eve, *in* the middle of a Ring, and under -- right *under* one of my oldest hills in Old England? Pook's Hill -- Puck's Hill -- Puck's Hill -- Pook's Hill! It's as plain as the nose on my face." (from *Puck of Pook's Hill* by Rudyard Kipling)

There is a standard format for setting up dialogue, and sticking to it can help make your writing clear. You really don't want your reader to get confused or frustrated about who is saying what. For more on dialogue format, read In Quotations: Formatting Dialogue. Dialogue is also one of the key elements of the dramatized scene, covered in the next part of this Guide.

## Scenes and half-scenes - Dramatize!

The basic building block of fiction is the scene, often called the *dramatized* scene, as it dramatizes important events. Along with narrative and exposition, discussed in Part 6, the scene and half-scene are the elements of which all fiction is composed. This part of the Beginner's Guide will explain what a scene is, what a half-scene is and what they do in fiction.

### What is a Scene, Anyway?

Most fiction is composed largely of scenes, so knowing what a scene is and how it works is vital for the fiction writer. In a handout for a course on novel writing he used to teach at the University of Victoria, Jack Hodgins defines a scene as "a unit of continuous prose narrative, taking place in one location, in which we see and hear

characters close-up, in order to move the story ahead by showing what is accomplished when one or more characters (or one character and a significant object) come together in a way that someone (perhaps everyone) pursues a goal and either succeeds, fails, or partially succeeds or fails, or lays the groundwork for succeeding (or failing) later." Phew. Sounds complicated. But here are the essential elements:

- *a unit of continuous prose narrative*: This simply means that a scene is a whole and not broken into separate chunks.
- *taking place in one location*: The scene doesn't jump from one location to another (which isn't to say that a scene can't happen while characters are on the move).
- *we see and hear characters close-up*: A scene is composed of action and dialogue that we "watch" as if it were happening in front of us.
- *someone pursues a goal*: This is where the drama comes in; you cannot have a scene if no one is trying to accomplish anything.
- *and either succeeds, fails . . .*: Every scene has an outcome, whatever that outcome might be.

The scene is the "show" part of writing in the old saying "Show, don't tell." It shows events happening, usually with accompanying dialogue, and gives a careful representation of words, thoughts, gestures and so on. The reader doesn't need to be able to see every single detail, but they must get a clear picture of what is going on. It is a good idea for you as the writer to know beforehand what each character brings into a scene -- what they want, what their immediate goals are, what they're willing to do to get what they want, what their attitudes are to other characters and so on. See if you can determine the answer to those things for the characters in the following scene.

Jessica and Richard walked down the sidewalk toward the restaurant. She had her arm
through his, and was walking as fast as her heels permitted. He hurried to keep up. Streetlights and the fronts of closed stores illuminated their path. They passed a stretch
of tall, looming buildings, abandoned and lonely, bounded by a high brick wall.

"You are honestly telling me you had to promise them an extra fifty pounds for our
table tonight? You are an idiot, Richard," said Jessica, her dark eyes flashing.

"They had lost my reservation. And they said all the tables were booked." Their steps echoed off the high walls.

"They'll probably have us sitting by the kitchen," said Jessica. "Or the door. Did you tell them it was for Mister Stockton?"

"Yes," replied Richard.

Jessica sighed. She continued to drag him along, as a door opened in the wall, a little way ahead of them. Someone stepped out and stood swaying for one long terrible
moment, and then collapsed to the concrete. Richard shivered and stopped in his tracks.
Jessica tugged him into motion.

"Now, when you're talking to Mister Stockton, you must make sure you don't interrupt

him. Or disagree with him -- he doesn't like to be disagreed with. When he makes a joke,
laugh. If you're in any doubt as to whether or not he's made a joke, look at me. I'll . . .
mm, tap my forefinger."

They had reached the person on the sidewalk. Jessica stepped over the crumpled form.
Richard hesitated. "Jessica?"

"You're right. He might think I'm bored," she mused. "I know," she said brightly,
"if he makes a joke, I'll rub my earlobe."

"Jessica?" He could not believe that she was simply ignoring the figure at their feet.

"What?" She was not pleased to be jerked out of her reverie.

"Look."

He pointed to the sidewalk. The person was face down, and enveloped in bulky clothes; Jessica took his arm and tugged him toward her. "Oh. I see. If you pay them
any attention, Richard, they'll walk all over you. They all have homes, really. Once she's slept it off, I'm sure she'll be fine." *She?* Richard looked down. It *was* a girl. Jessica continued, "Now I've told Mister Stockton that we . . ."
Richard was down on one knee. "Richard? What are you doing?"

"She isn't drunk," said Richard. "She's hurt." He looked at his fingertips. "She's bleeding."

Jessica looked down at him, nervous and puzzled. "We're going to be late," she pointed out.

"She's *hurt.*"

Jessica looked back at the girl on the sidewalk. Priorities: Richard had no priorities. "Richard. We're going to be late. Someone else will be along; someone else
will help her."

The girl's face was crusted with dirt, and her clothes were wet with blood. "She's
hurt," he said, simply. There was an expression on his face that Jessica hadn't seen before.

"Richard," she warned, and then she relented, a little, and offered a compromise.
"Dial 999 and call an ambulance then. Quickly, now."

Suddenly the girl's eyes opened, white and wide in a face that was little more than a
smudge of dust and blood. "Not a hospital, please. They'll find me. Take me somewhere
safe. Please." Her voice was weak.

"You're bleeding," said Richard. He looked to see where she had come from, but the
wall was blank and unbroken. He looked back to her still form and asked, "Why not a
hospital?"

"Help me?" the girl whispered, and her eyes closed.

Again he asked her, "Why don't you want to go to the hospital?" This time there was
no answer at all.

"When you call an ambulance," said Jessica, "don't give your name. You might have to make a statement or something, and then we'd be late . . . Richard? What are you doing?"

Richard had picked the girl up, cradling her in his arms. She was surprisingly light. "I'm taking her back to my place, Jess. I can't just leave her. Tell Mister Stockton I'm really sorry, but it was an emergency. I'm sure he'll understand."

"Richard Oliver Mayhew," said Jessica, coldly. "You put that girl down and come back here this minute. Or this engagement is at an end as of now. I'm warning you."

Richard felt the sticky warmth of blood soaking into his shirt. Sometimes, he realized, there is nothing you can do. He walked away, leaving behind Jessica, who stood there on the sidewalk, her eyes stung with tears. (from *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman)

**Elements of the Scene**

Every scene will contain some combination of the following items. You needn't use every one of these in every scene, although most scenes will have the majority of them. Use whatever you need to make the scene effective. How many of these elements can you identify in the example above?

- dialogue (this may have subtext or hidden meaning as well as the obvious meaning)
- dialogue tags (he said/she said)
- actions and gestures
- characters' thoughts
- exposition (see Part 6)
- description of setting
- comments or observations by the author or narrator
- transitions from the previous scene or narrative passage and/or into the next one

**Functions of the Scene**

- contributes to plot: A scene and its outcome move the plot along by having characters make decisions, succeed or fail, make plans, reveal information and more. Every scene must move your characters closer to the resolution of whatever problem they face.
- reveals character: Crawford Kilian says the key to writing a good scene is knowing what you want to show your readers about the character(s). See Part 4 for more on how to show character; most of these methods can be worked into a scene.
- contributes to theme: Symbolism, metaphors, recurring or striking images, references, allusions and similar things can tie the scene into the larger concerns of the novel.
- relates causally or thematically with events that happened before and events that will happen after: Every scene arises from an earlier scene and gives rise to later scenes, or, as David Gerrold says, "*Every scene must make the next scene inevitable*."

**Half-Scene???**

A half-scene is kind of like a mini scene in the middle of a summary narrative or passage of exposition. It is a sort of pause to "zoom in" on the action and give a taste of a dialogue exchange or other interaction between characters.

Richard was never as squeamish as he thought he was. Or rather, he was squeamish when it came to blood on screen: a good zombie movie or even an explicit medical drama would leave him huddled in a corner, hyper ventilating, with his hands over his eyes, muttering things like "Just tell me when it's over." But when it came to real blood, real pain, he simply did something about it. (from *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman)

**When to Dramatize**

It's all very fine to know what a scene is and how it differs from narrative or exposition, but how do you know when to dramatize an event as a scene and when to speed through with narrative? Generally, the most important events, those that are key to plot movement or character development, are the ones you'll want to linger over by writing them as scenes. Less important things, but those it is still necessary for the reader to know about, can be relegated to narrative. Of course, you won't always know which events are going to be the really important ones until you've written the first draft of your story. You'll almost certainly have to expand a few narrative sequences into dramatized scenes or collapse some scenes into summary narrative in later drafts. But don't worry, it's re-writing that turns good writing into art.

## Form versus Structure

Form can refer to two slightly different things in writing. When you are talking about the form of a piece of writing, you may say it is a poem, a work of prose, a play or something else. Form can also be used in a more specific sense to talk about the way a fictional work is written: a piece of fiction may be in the form of a letter ("Mary" by Edna O'Brien) or a journal (parts of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, it may be a series of emails between characters (*Powerbook* by Jeanette Winterson), or it may even be in verse (*Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Puskin).

Structure, on the other hand, has more to do with the frame of the fiction. In other words, the structure may involve a single incident or many incidents, there may be a couple of setbacks for the characters or there may be many of them, the climax may be reached early on or later in the piece, there may be a lengthy dénouement after the conflict has been resolved or there may be no dénouement at all, and so on. The work could be a single long third-person narrative, or a series of very short first-person passages from the point of view of different characters, or many other possibilities. These things refer to structure.

Most fiction is categorized as either short stories or novels, with some mid-length work classed as novellas, but what do these words mean? Primarily, these categories refer to length, but they can also indicate differences in structure. In the following discussion I will describe short stories, novellas and novels in terms of both length and structure. Keep in mind that these are generalizations used to conveniently class fiction; all of these categories can overlap in number of words and in structure.

## The Short Story

Edgar Allan Poe said a short story should be short enough to read in one sitting. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) has defined a short story as prose fiction up to 7,499 words for the purposes of their Nebula Award criteria. Other sources say it is usually no more than 15,000 words. Generally, a short story is short, or at least shorter than a novel. Structurally, a short story usually looks something like the following diagram:


Once upon a time, the lead-in to a story was much longer, introducing the reader to the main character, setting the scene and so on. These days, though, writers like to start a story as close as possible to whatever happens that changes the status quo -- one professor of mine called this the "precipitating incident," the thing that makes the story happen. Whatever the precipitating incident is, it changes the normal flow of events for the main character and begins the rising action, the main body of the story that leads up to the climax. The climax itself is where the protagonist must face his or her problems, whether those problems are natural events, an antagonist or something within the character him/herself. After the climax is the falling action or the resolution, in which things return to normal, the dénouement.

Most short stories have a simple structure like this. They focus on the life of a single character, or perhaps a couple of characters. They are centred on a single incident, usually a very significant one. A short story *could* have more characters or more events or other complications, but they tend not to simply because of their length. If you have too much that needs to happen, by the time you finish writing you'll have something longer than a short story.

## Short Short Stories and Flash Fiction

Very very short stories are often known as short shorts or flash fiction. These stories are usually under 1000 words, more often less than 500. Because of their extremely short length, short short stories make good use of allusions -- references to things outside the work itself -- to increase their impact. Allusions bring other connections and connotations to mind for the reader, and thus reduce the number of words a writer has to use in the story itself. It is difficult to explain exactly how this works, but good examples of this form are the stories that make up Michael Swanwick's Periodic Table of Science Fiction, available online at Sci Fiction.

## The Novella

*Novella* is one term among several that have been used over the years to refer to fiction that is longer than a short story but shorter than a novel. The SFWA/Nebula Award criteria defines a novella as 17,500 to 39,999 words. In its purest literary form, however, novella usually means a mid-length work of a particular structure.

The following diagram illustrates the structure of the "classic" novella; a good example of this kind of fiction is the well-known *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann.

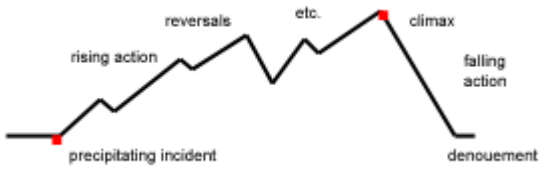

As you can see, novellas have a very similar structure to short stories. The main difference is that novellas have a "reversal" somewhere in the rising action. A reversal is simply something that happens to change the direction of the action. It might be a setback, a decision or some other event. In addition to this main structure, novellas usually begin close to the precipitating incident, but then often skip backwards in time to fill in all the necessary background detail. Then they return to the normal flow of events. Again, this is well illustrated by Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

**Novella versus Novelette**

Another word that has been used to refer to fiction somewhere between the short story and the novel in length is *novelette*. The specific meaning of this word had changed over time; at one time it simply meant a longish story or a shortish novel, at another time is was a slightly derogatory term for a short novel of very little substance. The word is not used extensively in English literature these days, but the SFWA makes use of it in its Nebula Award criteria to mean fiction of a length from 7,500 to 17,499 words, in other words between short story and novella length.

**The Novel**

A novel is a long piece of fiction. The actual length can vary greatly, but the SFWA/Nebula Award criteria specifies a length of 40,000 words and up. As you can see in the following diagram, novels tend to be much more complex in structure than short stories or novellas.




The actual number of reversals and almost-climaxes, setbacks and events can vary greatly. A novel may be only slightly more complicated than a short story (in fact, it is possible for a novel to have a structure identical to the short story diagram above, though it is unusual) or it may be far more complicated than this diagram. There may be only a few characters or there may be many; there are *usually* more characters than in a short story, as there is more room in a novel to explore them, but there don't have to be. The falling action/dénouement tends to be a little longer

than in a short story as well; with all those complications it can take longer for the writer to get the characters back to normal and show the results of the climax.

### How Do You Know?

How do you know which of these structures is appropriate to the story you want to tell? One way is to simply write the thing and see what it turns out as. On the other hand, it can be helpful to have some idea of the shape a story will take before you start writing. So consider what sort of story you are telling. Is it a simple tale of a significant event that happens to one character to somehow change that character's life? Perhaps it would make a good short story, especially if you feel it won't take many pages to tell. Is the story very complicated, with many events and lots of characters and all kinds of obstacles to overcome? Perhaps it would be best as a novel, then. Also think about the period of time covered in the story. There's no saying that something that happens in one night must be a short story and something that happens over years must be a novel, but if you want to cover many years in some detail, you might not be able to fit the story into a shorter structure. The best thing to do is simply experiment until you get used to the way your stories tend to work out (and don't stop experimenting even then).

## Types of story - Focus

All stories have plots, ideas, characters, events and places in them, but not all stories focus as strongly on all of these aspects. In some stories the characters are of much more importance than the plot, and in other stories an idea may be central. Whether a story is focussed on plot or character or idea may influence how you write it. A plot-driven story will require much more planning (or plotting) than a character driven story, for example. Thus it is important to know something about the differences between types of stories and the demands each type makes on a writer.

### The Plot-Driven Story

A plot-driven story is one in which the intricacies of the plot are the most important aspects of the story. Plot-driven stories have characters and ideas and setting and all that, but those are secondary to the functioning of the plot. The characters act in accordance with the plot, and never for any other reason; the setting is designed so as to best work with the plot; and so on. Because the characters are secondary to the plot, they may seem flat; the reader keeps reading not because they are fascinated by the characters, but because they want to find out *what happens next*.

The most well-known plot-driven stories are mysteries -- especially murder mysteries; the plot creates the mystery, so the plot/mystery is the focus of the story. Plot-driven stories must generally be carefully outlined ahead of time, before the real writing begins, so that the writer doesn't lose track of where the story needs to go. Consequently, many plot-driven stories lack a feeling of spontaneity, and it can be difficult (though not impossible) to infuse them with life. Plot-driven stories can also become very formulaic unless the writer is a clever plotter.

### The Idea-Driven Story

According to Orson Scott Card in *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*, "ideas" are the bits of information the characters discover over the course of the story or novel. Idea stories, then, are *about* the process of discovering that information. This is much like the plot-driven story, as the plot becomes the means of discovery.

An idea-*driven* story could be said to be a story focussed on a central idea or group of related ideas that inspired the story. This central idea structures the plot, and the characters and events are arranged so as to express the idea. A central idea might be a what-if, such as *What if Earth was infected with a virus that killed only people who carried the gene for telepathy?* (Assuming, of course, that there *is* a gene for telepathy. The main idea of a story could also be something like *Cutting down trees is wrong*, so the whole story aims to illustrate why cutting down trees is wrong. Hard science fiction (much other science fiction, too) is often written as idea-driven stories.

As you can see from the examples, the central idea of an idea-driven story affects the plot: it must be constructed so that the idea is expressed; it affects the characters: everything they do and say must contribute to the expression of the idea; and so on. The idea is central, so all other aspects of the story must focus on it.

**The Character-Driven Story**

Much literary fiction is character-driven, which is to say that the characters are central. In a character-driven story, the events (in other words, the plot) arise from the characters. Each new scene is the result of the reactions and interactions of the characters. This kind of story, more than any other, requires deep characterization (see Part 4), at least of the principle actors. The interest for the reader is in following around a character with whom they can somehow identify or sympathize.

The character-driven story can be effectively written without first constructing a plot outline, though having some idea of where the story is headed can help keep it on track (see Part 2). Because the character(s) is central, the writer can discover what that character does each time he or she sits down at the keyboard (or notebook). If you are the kind of writer who likes to work from an outline but you want to write a character-driven story it is important to remember not to be a slave to your outline. You may want to try outlining on a chalkboard or whiteboard so you can adjust your outline if a character decides to wander off in an unexpected direction.

**The Milieu Story**

The "milieu," says Orson Scott Card, is the world in which a story happens, whether that is the real world or an invented one. It includes not just the physical world (but it does include all aspects of that, such as geography, weather, animal life and so on), but also the society, religion, other people and just about everything else. Card uses Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as an example of a milieu story -- it is not the characters the reader (or the writer) is most interested in, but all the strange lands to which Gulliver travelled. The comparison of those lands to the English society of the time (and any "real" society at any time) was the focus and the point of the story. Many anthropological science fiction stories (and also many anthropological real-world stories) are also milieu stories.

The structure of a milieu story is: a character travels to a strange/unknown place; observes the culture, geography or whatever is interesting or significant; is somehow affected or changed; and returns home a different person. If you are writing a story in which the places you send your characters have deep significance or fascination, then you are probably writing a milieu story, so you should consider the milieu story structure.

### The Event Story

The event story is another of Orson Scott Card's categories. In this kind of story Something is Wrong with the world (or universe). Perhaps a great evil has come into being, someone important has died and things are falling apart without them, an enemy has taken over, or something equally dire has happened or come to light.

This kind of story does not generally begin when things go wrong, as one might think it should. Catastrophic events like those given as examples are often too big to be effective (though that shouldn't discourage you for trying if you really want to). Rather, the event story begins at the point where the person most crucial to sorting things out enters the action. The story ends, naturally, when the wrong has been righted or the evil banished and the world is returned to order (not necessarily the same as before things went wrong). Many (perhaps most) fantasy stories are event stories, but so are some literary works like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, Jane Austen's *Emma* and many others.

### Combining Types

There's no reason, of course, that you have to stick strictly with any single story type. Try combining them to see what would happen. Some types will be more difficult to mix together than others; it would be very hard to make a story equally plot-driven and character-driven, for example. You could try making a story primarily one type and secondarily another, such as a tale than is mainly about the characters, but has a secondary focus on the milieu. You can also embed one kind of story within another kind; try writing a milieu story about a character's travels to a distant land, and insert a murder mystery that occurs along the way.

Above all, use these story types as guides to possible structures and sources of ideas rather than as strict rules. You never know where you'll end up if you break the rules, but you're more likely to end up with a success if you know those rules *before* you try breaking them.

## Genre - What is Genre?

A genre is simply a category of writing. Fiction is usually categorized by topic or structure into genres like mystery, romance, science fiction and so on. In recent years "genre fiction" has become something of a derogatory term because most genres have conventions of structure and other characteristics that can become predictable and repetitive if not handled skilfully. In this essay, we'll examine how genre functions and what writing in a particular genre means to an author.

### What is Genre For?

The most obvious function of genre is as a publishing category -- a marketing tool. Calling two different books "science fiction" or "romance" lets a buyer know that they are similar in some way. If a person enjoyed one book classified as "romance fiction," there's a greater chance that they'll enjoy another book classified the same way than that they'll like one classed as "horror." Genre allows booksellers to group novels or story collections in their bookstores in such a way that readers can more easily find the sort of book they want.

Of course, using genre as a marketing tool has distinct disadvantages, too. It means that a science fiction junkie might never venture over into the mystery aisle, because they know they'll find something good in science fiction. Meanwhile, there could be any number of books in mystery that they'd like even better. Even more unfortunate are all the books that don't quite fit into any single genre. They often end up wedged into a genre that isn't entirely appropriate, and may never get to their ideal audience because of that.

As Orson Scott Card pointed out, genre can allow for the formation of communities of people, as well. Readers of science fiction are known for large gatherings celebrating their favourite genre; these are places where people of like mind can gather. On the other hand, the result could be a categorization and segregation of people as well as books.

Whatever negative comments one might come up with regarding genre, could you imagine trying to decide where to look in a bookstore when you want a particular kind of book to read? It's a nice thought that maybe someday there will be no genres and all fiction will simply be arranged alphabetically by author. On a practical level, though, it would mean people would have to take a lot more time to find a book to read. To bibliophiles like me, that's a good thing, but many people might not bother with reading at all if they had to spend a few hours looking for a book, rather than a few minutes.

**What Does Genre Mean for the Writer?**

Whatever genre is or does, it has important consequences for writers. All genres have conventions -- certain things that are understood between reader and writer. A good example is the use of faster-than-light space travel in science fiction. Although it is theoretically impossible, faster-than-light travel is acceptable in sf because it is a recognized convention. Of course, just because a genre has conventions it doesn't mean a writer has to follow those conventions. It does mean, however, that a writer of that genre must be aware of what the conventions are and how they have been used. It's a case of "you've got to know the rules before you can break them" (and, of course, you also have to know the rules before you can follow them).

Genres very often also share structure. The mystery genre is a good example. By its very nature, a mystery story has to have a mystery in it -- often a murder. The story can't properly begin until the mystery has come to light, so most mystery fiction begins with the main character finding (or finding out about) a dead body (or whatever the mystery is to be ). The story ends when the mystery is solved (or, more rarely, when the detective is forced to give up). The middle part of the story, then, consists of gathering clues. It would be very difficult to write a mystery novel without this structure. The danger is that such a clear structure can very easily become predictable and begin to bore a reader who reads many similar stories.

Being aware of this tendency towards predictability can allow a writer to work to avoid the problem. Every genre will have its own structures and conventions and its own dangers that a writer need to be conscious of. And *that* is the real significance of genre for a writer.

### Get Familiar With Genre

If you are writing the same kind of fiction that you read, you are probably quite familiar with the conventions of your genre, but Crawford Kilian points out that you need to be *consciously* familiar with them. You need to be able to say what they are and know how they have been and can be used. The way to do that is to pay attention while reading fiction in your genre so you are aware of all its elements (if you are like me, that probably means reading a book once for pure enjoyment, and then again to see what the writer did and how they did it). It is also good to read theoretical work and criticism about your genre (but see Part 11 for more on the good and bad sides of reading about writing).

Do some exploring online -- the web is a great place to find information on specific genres. To get started, you can explore the Fiction Genres links and the links in the little box to the right of this article. For more specific information on some genres, try the Mystery Fiction links, the Science Fiction and Fantasy links and the Romance Fiction links.

Offline, have a look in the literary criticism section of your local bookstore. Books about writing often contain some discussion of genre -- for example, Crawford Kilian's *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* has useful definitions of many of the subgenres of f&sf. Genre-specific fiction and review magazines are also good places to look. Have fun!

## Reading and revision

### You've Written It, Now Write It Again

No matter how good your first draft is, you'll have to do some editing. Many of the very best writers today *are* the very best because they revise and re-write and edit over and over until every word is perfect. Sounds like a lot of work? It is, but it can just as enjoyable as writing something the first time. If you've written something that was worth the time you spent on the first draft, then it's worth spending even more time revising it. A first draft might be good, but why not make it better? In fact, why not make it the best it can possibly be? You can only do this by editing, revising, re-writing, cutting sections, or whatever the individual piece needs. This is especially true if you want to share your work with others. After all, you want your readers to like your work. Edit it, and they'll like it even more.

### Reading Your Own Writing

One very important skill, and one that is very difficult to learn, is the ability to read your own writing objectively. You'll probably never be able to be truly objective about something you created yourself -- most writers either can't see the flaws in their "babies" or they see more flaws than are actually there (sometimes both in the

same piece!). You can learn to step back from your work, though, and read it more like you would read someone else's work.

Being able to see the strengths and flaws in other writers' work is a skill that can be applied to your own writing (for more on the uses and dangers of reading other people's work, see "The Importance of Reading for Writers"). One of the strengths of writing workshops, in my opinion, is that they create a situation in which you can learn to critique writing by starting with someone else's work. Of course, it is always easier to figure out what doesn't work in another's writing. One reason for this is that you have distance from the work, you have no personal emotional investment in it.

One trick many writers use is to put a story (or whatever the work is) away for a while. Sometimes a few days is sufficient; more often a few weeks or months is best. The point in this is to forget the *process* of writing the particular piece. If you can stop thinking about how you went about writing the thing, then you can focus more effectively on what is *in* the work, and therefore on what needs to be added or subtracted or changed to make the story work better.

**Editing**

Editing takes a number of forms, from a quick once-over looking for typos and grammatical errors, to a complete re-write of the whole work. For most fiction, you'll need to do a little of all of these kinds of editing, and often one will lead into another. Generally, it's best not to attempt everything at once. You'll need to figure out what order works best for you (or what works best for the thing you're working on, as every piece of fiction makes its own, individual demands). One way to minimize the work involved is to begin with the larger kinds of editing like cutting and adding and moving sections (or re-writing the whole, if necessary), then move on to copyediting for grammar and spelling.

**Copyediting and Line-by-Line**

This is the kind of editing every writer expects to do, no matter how perfect they thought their first draft was. Typos happen no matter how careful you are. A good system for copyediting is to go through a draft looking for a specific thing -- spelling errors, for example. Then go through again looking for run-on sentences and other grammar problems (especially if you know there's an error you commonly make). Edit again to make sure your nouns are descriptive and you haven't overused adjectives. You could try to do all these things in one go-through, but trust me, you'll miss fewer errors and problems if you only do a few things (or even just one thing) at a time.

Don't consider your story done once you're finished copyediting. Chances are, there will be a lot more to do than just the little picky details. Expand your editing a little to include reworking problem sentences, making each paragraph work on its own and along with the paragraphs around it, getting your transitions smooth and logical and so on. Sometimes you can take a story from good to brilliant, but copyediting and tweaking aren't going to do it; making that kind of improvement needs something more drastic. For that reason, I often leave copyediting and other basic editing until last, or I copyedit every now and then as I do other kinds of reworking.

**Revising**

Revising a work takes more than just copyediting or basic tweaking at the sentence or paragraph level. For this you need to *re-vision* the piece (as Jack Hodgins says); you need to see the story afresh and determine how bigger changes could make it a better work. This kind of editing may involve such things as reworking sections, moving things around, changing the point of view, looking for gaps in the plot and so on.

Read through you work to see what elements recur. Could you make use of these on a metaphorical or symbolic level? What would happen if you shifted the point of view to third person from first? Would you create more suspense by moving a section later in the story? If you're working on a computer, copy your story to a new file, then try out anything that occurs to you as possibly having a good result. That way, if you don't like the changes you made, you've still got the original draft. Experiment all you like without having to worry that you'll mess up the story.

**Re-Writing**

Revising a work often leads to an all-out rewrite. Sometimes the only way to get a story beyond good to fabulous is to put aside the draft entirely and re-write from scratch. Theoretically, it should be easier than writing the first time. You already know what happens, after all. And having to take the time to re-write everything means you'll pare out anything that isn't actually needed; you'll be concise. And often, re-writing is the easiest way to add in new material smoothly; instead of trying to fit it into an existing draft, it'll flow right in as you write the whole over again. Re-writing does seem rather drastic, but it can often be very rewarding. And in many cases, you may actually spend less time editing if you just start all over and let the needed changes work in organically than if you copyedit, tweak and revise over and over trying to get it right.

**Cutting**

Cutting is something that can be done at any of the levels of editing -- cutting a word will often fix the grammar, while cutting a section can be done while revising or re-writing. Cutting is also one of the most-needed and least-used (at least by novice writers) editing tools. It's difficult to just delete those words you spent so much time composing. Still, it's something that has to be done. Sentences can often be greatly improved by cutting unnecessary adjectives and adverbs and paragraphs can be made better by removing sentences that don't really need to be there. It's harder to cut whole paragraphs and sections, but that can be important, too. If you're only keeping a section because you *like* it, the story would probably be better without it. If you're afraid to cut something, make a new file on your computer to keep it in; that way, you still have it (and maybe it'll be perfect for a different story).

One place where a lot of new writers -- and even a lot of pros -- need to cut is at the beginning. Often a writer begins the story with a sort of preamble that is useful for the writer to get into the work, but which the reader does not need. Instead of just getting right into a story, the tendency is for most writers to start but writing *about* the story.

Even if you don't think you've done this sort of lead-in, try cutting the first page of your story. Take any necessary information and work it in later. Chances are, the beginning will be much punchier, much more likely to draw a reader right in. If you

don't think that experiment worked, try cutting just the first paragraph or two, or try hacking off two pages. Experiment to see how the opening of the story is made more effective or less effective by starting in a different place. (Its very unlikely you'll need to *add* anything at the beginning.)

**Now Go Do It**

As I said in the Introduction to this Guide, you need to forget all the how-to information while you're writing, but once you've got a draft, you need to figure out what to do with it. That is the time to go back through the Guide (or your favourite how-to book) and start asking yourself some questions. Read through the plot section and see if your plot works the way it should. Do your events flow logically from one another? Are they causally related? Skim through setting and see if your settings fulfil the possibilities as well as they could. Have you made use of the different ways of evoking character? Does your point of view work? Would a different one work better? Have you used the appropriate types of prose in the appropriate places? Do you dramatize scenes to show rather than tell in the most important places? Is your structure a good one for the type of story and the genre you are working with? Figure out the answers to these and similar questions and you will be well on your way to knowing how to change your draft to make it into an even better story.

So what are you waiting for? Go write. Then edit. Make your stories into art.