PENterest: Penning your own imaginative pieces

Course Description: Writing is a gift that gets better every year. If you wish to learn new writing techniques to open up an imagination of surprises free your PENterest and discover how art, music, poetry and literature in- spire original and creative thought. Learn skills to create suspense, compose the perfect sentence, bring characters to life, and develop your written voice. Create poetry houses, direct your own sitcom or spoof, and play with words. You will leave this session with a wealth of writing tools, fresh ideas, and a portfolio overflowing with original poems, stories, and thoughts

Unit Theme: Creative Writing

Conceptual Lens: Power

Major Generalization: The pen is mightier than the sword

Essential Questions:
How can words empower you?
How does expression create power?
What tools do writers use to give power to a piece of writing?

Essential Understandings:
Words are sometimes more powerful than actions.
The written expression releases emotions that are powerful.
Writers use many tools to make their pieces powerful.

Academic Focus:

Writing Tools/Academic Focus

- Diction: connotation, denotation, verbs vs. adj/adv.
- Syntax
- Pacing: loose/periodic sentences, polysyndeton, asyndeton, repetition, anaphora, epiphora
- Figurative Language: idioms, simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, understatement
- Sounds: alliteration, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia
- Revision Techniques: Sentence variety graphs, sentence starts, dead word removal, sentence combinations, phrases, clauses
- Plot diagrams
- Character development
- Brainstorming Technique

Diction, Details and Imagery:
Type 1's

- Discuss connotation /denotation and provide numerous examples or the affect of word choice
- Post examples of resumes each with different word choice and ask the students to observe the differences
- Provide vivid excerpts of settings, characters, and events: *Hatchet, To Kill a Mockingbird, Tuck Everlasting, Hunger Games, The Fall of the House of Usher*
- Show clip from *Sherlock Holmes*: *The dinner scene that ends with wine in his face*
- Observe various forms of art
- Spotting the differences: students will look at several pictures and try to locate the differences between similar photographs.
- Mad Libs

Type II's

- **Dude, Where's my Rock?** Students will pick a rock and study it closely. They will write down every aspect of the rock. They will return the rock and write a full description of the rock that will be given to other classmates who will try to locate the rock.
- Eavesdropping: Students will practice eavesdropping on someone's conversation. Since they can not see the people, they must rely on auditory clues and record their descriptions.
- What is that, I'm feeling? Students will work with a partner and may use only their sense of touch to figure out the 10 mystery items.
- One partner will sit facing the screen the other will sit with his back away from the screen. A short movie clip will be played with no volume and the job of the person watching the screen is to explain to the person not watching what is happening in the clip. After the clip has played, students will sketch a quick picture and then watch the actual clip to see how they measured up.

- The students will spend 10 minutes blindfolded and guided by a partner. The partner will be in charge of recording the blindfolded student's experience. The main focus is to get students to focus on the other senses outside of *sight*. The recorder should jot down everything described as best as possible including the frustrations of the blindfolded student. Set up stations to use the different senses. Touch: noodles, rubber mask, any objects with unique or varied textures. Sound: different instrumental noises or sound effects. Taste: marshmallows, pretzels, Pop-Rocks, Jolly Rancher, strawberry or grape. Smell: soap, cinnamon, garlic, Parmesan cheese, perfume strip. Students will partner up. After both students have the opportunity to have the blind experience, they will return to class exchange notes and write about their individual experience using specific details
- **RIP DEAD VERBS**: After teaching the concept of strong verbs, students will put the dead verbs to rest. Depending on the class, students can deliver eulogies, design epitaphs, create obituaries, and even conduct a burial.
- Using the letter tiles in a "Bananagrams" game set, children will think of many, varied, unusual words to create, that show a variety of word choice
- Students will write a paragraph in which the first sentence includes the name of a color. Students may use the "color word" only once in each paragraph, but must suggest the color in as many ways as possible using various literary elements and descriptive language.
- **Similes:** Have children go through select children's books and find good and bad examples of similes. Have them share them with the class, and write them on the board. Erase the end of each simile, so it has an open end ("as cold as _____") Have students

fill in the blanks with many, varied, and interesting comparisons. Extension: Have students choose the worst simile they can find from The Manbottle and explain why similes like these are not effective

- Students will attempt to match literary device names with a sentence or phrase, which is marked in a book on the Interest Development Center shelf, that exemplifies a specific device

Point of View:

Type I's

- Read "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs", Excerpts from "Mirror, Mirror" and Mother/Daughter Reader's theater
- *Good Boy, Fergus!* By David Shannon
- *I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat by Donald Hall*
- Teacher will discuss with the students the strategies of category prompting and stream of consciousness writing and how they help us to be effective writers in the face of "writer's block"
- Read *Joyful Noise*
- Students will read poems aloud

TYPE II's

- Students will use the idea from Donald Hall's book, *I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat,* to show two different perspectives about the same thing.
- Stage a sudden event in the class (A stranger enters and steals the teacher's computer while her back is turned). Ask the students to write down every detail they remember and explain exactly what they witnessed (focus on details). Allow the students to share their perspectives and note the differences as well as the detail/lack of detail.
- Provide scenarios and ask each student to role-play from alternating perspectives (cat, dog, mom, dad, baby, etc.)
- Give students an inanimate object and have them tell a story from the object's point of view.
- Tell a story from a pet's perspective
- Blind, deaf, mute perspective: students work in small groups and each person has a disability. They will all experience the same event but without one sense. They will share their perspectives in group
- Students will work in groups to try to match excerpts to the correct point of view. The winning group will choose the point of view for today's story prompt.
- RAFT assignment for "The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
A. Wolf	Jury	Testimony	***I*** am telling the TRUE story of the 3 little

			pigs.
Grandma	A. Wolf's parents	Letters	Give Al a chance (and some money for a lawyer)
Third Pig	Newspaper Readers	Letter to the Editor	My brothers were mincemeat –and AL ATE THEM
Police Officer	Jury	Testimony	He blew the house and the law down
A.Wolf's lawyer	Jury	Closing Statement	The wolf isn't so big and bad. He is telling the TRUE story.
Reporter on the Scene	Newspaper Reader	Editorial	A.Wolf is guilty! What is all this huff and puff about?

- Photo Narrator: Students will choose a photograph of a random person and write a quick story or poem from the person in the photograph's point of view.
- After reading Fractured Fairy Tales students will list ideas for their own twists on classic tales. They will write a 5-minute script which will be performed individually or by classmates.

Tone:

Type I's

- Listen to several classical pieces of music. Ask the students to share the tone of each piece.

- Students will observe a selection of art pieces. They will share their opinions of the tone for each piece.
- Practice saying phrases in a variety of tones.
- Reader's Theater: Students will perform selected readings either alone or in pairs.

Type II's

- After discussing tone and mood, Students will choose their favorite art piece and use it as a story prompt modeling the tone and mood.
- Students will compose a persuasive letter trying to get something they want from three different people (3 different audiences): parent, teacher, friend, sibling, boss, organization, etc.

Story generators and warm-ups

Type I

- Read parodies of children's books to the class.
- Students will use *Weird Headline Maker* to generate ideas for a story. This can also be used as just a silly time to get the creative juices flowing.
- http://www.brucevanpatter.com/funstuff.html
- Inspiring excerpts: Teachers will read excerpts from novels, short stories, etc. to spark inspiration in students.
- Watch an old Black and White Silent comedy film
- **Monster mania:** Students will look through various books and investigate the monsters of the past and present.
- Students will have a team-writing contest. Each team will be given a starting line for a story and a poem. The students will write only one line and pass the paper to the next teammate who will write one line. This cycle will continue for 10 minutes. The team with the best story wins.
- Writing with Writers: Students will choose between Poetry, Mystery Writing, Biography Writing, Myth Writing, News Writing, and Descriptive Writing and take a virtual tour of some of the techniques professionals use http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/
- Class Read: "Love That Dog"
- Display of multiple famous authors' biographies from varied places and time periods
- Listen to Run D.M.C.'s classic, "My Adidas"
- Read lost and found ads in the local newspaper

Type II's

- **Riddle Time**: Students will secretly draw random objects from a bag. The students will then use their creativity to write a riddle to stump their classmates.
- **Poetic Muse:** Using the poem of their choice for inspiration, have group members create a character, a setting, a situation, and a character goal, from the poem and write a short story.

- **Silent Film Script:** Allow students time to brainstorm, then ask each student to write a 5-minute script for the silent film.
- **Lost and Found:** After reading several lost and found ads and using the productive thinking talent, ask students to develop their own lost and found ad for something typically not found in the lost and found section i.e. patience, smile, thoughts
- **My Adidas:** Wherever you go in life, you can't go anywhere without your feet, so why not give your mouth a break and let your shoes tell your story? After listening to Run D.M.C.'s classic, "*My Adidas*," students will think about everywhere their shoes have taken them and the story they have to tell. Using literary devices such as personification, point of view, repetition and rhyme scheme, students will creatively and vividly describe their life and experiences from the perspective of their shoes. The focus trait for this activity is idea development as students will be letting their shoes tell their story; their message is their life's story so they will need a strong idea with unique details. The support trait is organization due to the need for strong, purposeful stanzas that keep the story progressing; as with all stories, a strong introduction, conclusion and title are necessary.
- **Decalogue:** After reading an excerpt from *Because of Winn-Dixie* the writer first writes a personal Decalogue (a list of ten personal beliefs) about something important to him/her. The writer then creates a Decalogue for a fictional character they will invent and envision. The final product of this assignment is a short story where their character reveals his/her Decalogue to another character through dialogue. The focus trait in this writing assignment is voice; writers will attempt to write genuinely from another's perspective. The support trait in this assignment is organization; using the graphic organizer and loosely imitating the cited chapter from Because of Winn Dixie will give students a new experience with organizational planning.
- **Dictionary Detail:** Students will choose ten random words from a dictionary. Students will use the words to suggest a character, a setting, and a problem. Students will put the character into a situation where the problem is not easily overcome and write a short story.
- **Poetic story**: After reading ***Love That Dog,*** students will write a story using the journal/poem form.
- **Convince Me**: Imagine two characters. One wants to do something and the other does not, or one wants something the other has. Have the class work together to talk out a dialogue between these two characters, where one character is determined not to give in to the other, to create extrinsic tension. As a follow up, have students partner up and create their own persuasive dialogue, and write their script.
- **Name Game**: Give each small group or pair a photograph of a person. The photographs can be close up headshots, distance shots, or activity shots. Ask each group to suggest a name for the character, based on whatever they can learn or intuit from the image.
- **Story Strips**: Have strips of paper for children to write on at the Interest Development Center. Have students each take time to read the sentences written earlier by other students and write a new sentence to add to the end of the story and keep the sequence moving.
- **DaVinci's Doodles:** Draw a squiggly shape on the board and let the students complete it. Share the finished pictures or possibly use one picture for writing prompt.
- **Parodies:** After reading parodies and discussing the skills to create parodies, allow

students to choose a short children's book and create their own parody.

- **Myths:** Why do….? Students will collect a question card at the start of class. Why do cows moo? Why do rabbits hop? Why do birds eat worms, etc. Students will use their creativity to create a myth about their given question.
- **Monster Mania:** After investigating monsters, students will jot down ideas for their own original monster and begin a storyboard for their antagonist.
  TALENTS: Productive Thinking "Think of the many varied, unusual characteristics of a monster. Try to think of examples that your classmates would not think of. You will share your ideas with the class.
- After exploring Writing with Writers website, students will choose a genre and write their own story/poem. **(Decision Making and Planning Talent)**
- Students will write letters to favorite author/poet.
- **Jumble Story** Preparation: Have students choose three numbers (from 1 to 10). Each number corresponds to an item on the list below. The first number is the character their stories are to focus on, the second number is the setting for their stories, and so forth. Assignment: Write a story with the character, setting, time period, and situation that you've chosen. The character that you've chosen should be the main character in the story, but isn't necessarily the ONLY character in the story. Likewise, most of the story will take place in the setting that you've chosen, but you can include other settings or elaborate on the setting that you have chosen (breaking it into several smaller settings, for example). The situation or challenge that you've chosen may involve the main character or your main character may observe someone else who must deal with the situation or challenge. In other words, you can combine these elements anyway that you desire, so long as all four are included in your story.

Character	**Time**
1. a new mother	1. during a forest fire
2. a photographer	2. after a fight
3. a recent high school graduate	3. the night of high school graduation
4. a restaurant owner or manager	4. after a big meal
5. an alien from outer space	5. sometime in December
6. a homeless child	6. late at night
7. a 93-year-old woman	7. after a big thunderstorm has passed
8. an environmentalist	8. in early spring
9. a college student	9. first week of the school year
10. a jazz musician3.	10. during a concert.
Setting	**Situation/Challenge**
1. near a National Forest	1. an important decision needs to be made
2. a wedding reception	2. a secret need to be confessed to someone else
3. a celebration party	3. someone's pride has been injured
4. an expensive restaurant	4. a death has occurred
5. a shopping mall	5. someone has found or lost something
6. a city park	6. someone has accused someone else of doing something wrong
7. the porch of an old farmhouse	7. reminiscing on how things have changed
8. a polluted stream	

9. a college library 10. a concert hall5.	8. someone feels like giving up 9. something embarrassing has just happened 10. someone has just reached an important goal.

Type III

- The student can illustrate and revise/edit the original parody piece and publish it online.
- Writing with Writers: Students may publish their journal on line
- Coffee House Readings
- Enter various writing contests
- Create a literary Magazine for the class work
- Create a video using class readings and inspirations

RESOURCES

Make it a Hobby

Practice

1. http://postcards.www.media.mit.edu/Postcards/ This page lets children write messages for informal purposes and formats and choose postcards on which to write them on. They may e-mail these postcards to other people who are on-line. The recipient is notified by e-mail. They can also include links and pictures on them. I think that this would be useful practice for student communication skills.
2. http://www.okidoki.com/en/rw/index.htm This page allows students to write and submit stories about themselves, pets, sports, and other topics. they can also read other children's entries. They will get responses, after writing, via e-mail. I found this to be an innovative way to motivate students to write and boost their confidence.
3. http://www.worldkids.net/katw/katw.htm There are links from this page to activities for children which include letter writing projects to sick or injured children and the elderly. There is also an

opportunity for creative writing about the pictures that are on the page.

4. http://www.vsa.cape.com/~powens/kidnews.html This is a really neat news page that allows students to read a lot about sports, news, and reviews. It also allows them to submit articles they write on their own. This would be a very interesting way to introduce children to writing for news media.
5. http://www.write4kids.com This is one of the most useful writing sites for children on the web. It has a free library of how-to info, a chat room for children's writers and illustrators, writing surveys for kids, and a question board for children to ask questions to children's authors and receive responses. There is also a link to writing tools for children's authors including books and addresses.
6. http://www.comenius.com/index.html This site is a great resource for your gifted students who need enrichment in the regular classroom. It will be a little advanced in some parts, but the weekly idiom and fable are great! There are on-line exercises to do with the fable that enrich vocabulary and comprehension. It has a great deal of potential to improve writing with enrichment for style and vocab.
7. http://www.k14.peak.org/k14/curriculum/writing/ This page is a starting point for students who want to work on writing. The focus is on creative writing but also offers information on different genres and illustrating tips. This is a great resource of information for your talented writers.
8. http://kids.ot.com/ This web site can help students with typing skills by offering moderated chat which is governed by rules. This can also encourage development of writing dialogue. There is also a blank page designated for student submitted stories and poems. Goals are to publish something new every week. Kids can easily and safely manage this site.
9. http://www.csnet.net/minds-eye/home.html This site is very cool! Students try to communicate original monsters features from an image on their screen to another child's mind using learned writing skills and technology. This is a fabulous site, home of the Monster Exchange Project. Schools and students from around the world participate together to practice communication and writing skills.
10. http://toonacat.com/index.html This site offers many opportunities for students to use their writing skills in a context that they will find enjoyable. It offers a chance to write to Toona Cat, ask him questions, read writing by other children, enter contests, and write stories and poems. It is definitely easy for students to navigate, no matter how narrow their knowledge of computers.
11. http://mycreativewritingchallenge.tumblr.com/post/16858313832/30-day-creative-writing-challenge This site sets up a 30-day creative writing challenge. Grab a pen or a laptop and have some fun!
12. http://writingprompts.tumblr.com/ This page is filled with thoughtful writing prompts, art, and debatable issues to spark anyone's creativity.
13. http://www.funenglishgames.com/writinggames.html This website offers on-line tutorials and games to explore writing and promote creativity. Target grades K-6
14. http://www.eduplace.com/tales/ You enter in words and ideas and this story generator makes up wacky tales using your information.
15. http://www.kidscom.com/create/write/write.html Try your writing skills, Use your imagination, read fun stories and maybe even get published on the Internet!
16. http://educationportal.com/articles/40_of_the_Best_Websites_for_Young_Writers.html This site provides a list of the 40 Best Websites for young writers.

For the Serious Writer

Publishing

Children Writers: Internet Resources for Publishing on the Web

Write Me a Story "How does Write Me a Story work? Each week we challenge you to write a story with the character, prop and place we give you. You send it in, KidsCom Kids vote on their favorites and the work of two kids from each age group end up in Stunningly Stupendous Stories every week." Votes are tallied in two divisions: eleven and under, and twelve and over. Last week's story placed Dad and a parachute in the jungle. Hmm .... ripe with possibilities, isn't it?

ZOOM Send It ZOOM, a PBS television series and awesome Web site, goes beyond stories and poems and also wants your art work, recipes, science experiments, media reviews, home movies, plays, brainteasers, jokes and craft ideas. Although just a portion of the work submitted gets published on the Web site, some of makes it to the television show. "ZOOM is powered by the 1,025,697 kids who sent in stuff so far." That's a lot of creative kids.

CRUNCH From the National Center for Educational Statistics, CRUNCH Provides a forum for student-created content; we invite you to challenge yourselves, explore ideas in new ways, and have fun doing so!" Submissions are accepted for Features (current feature topic is School Uniforms), Arts Review ("Choose a book, compact disk, concert, art show, movie, or TV show and explain why others should read, listen to, or view it."), Tech Review (for games, software or hardware) and Show-Off (fiction and poetry).

ZuZu ZuZu is made great by the contribution of young artists, photographers and writers just like YOU. The following pages offer instant submission opportunities for your creative pleasure... Write on!" ZuZu used to be a print magazine distributed to schools in New York city, but in 1996 it re-invented itself on the World Wide Web. For their upcoming issue (they still have that print mentality), ZuZu is soliciting mystery stories, and articles about your collections of stuff, your neighborhood, and young people making a difference in the world.

Kid's Space The site has rapidly developed into many sections including creative activities, communication pages, and sections for learning basic computer skills. Good audio clips of music by kids are available in three options.

The StoneSoup Magazine is a classic for children's publishing!

Midlink Magazine This electronic magazine was created by kids, for kids in the middle grades -- generally ages 10 to 15. Browse through the interactive space to enjoy art and writing that will link middle school kids all over the world.

New Moon This is a site for the magazine for girls writing of their dreams and aspirations. Provides a set of guidelines for writers.

Young Writer's Clubhouse Created by Deborah Morris, the author of the Real Kids, Real Adventures series. This site offers a great deal of sound information and opportunities for young people through writing.

English Online Writer's Window Writers up to age seventeen are encouraged "to share their work and help each other improve their writing." Published works are categorized by age range and genre, and reader feedback is solicited about each piece. Categories include short stories, poetry, research papers, book reviews, television reviews and movie reviews. There are also five continuous stories that you can add to.

Kids' Space -- Story Book "Kids' Space", available in either English or Japanese, has four arenas for publishing kid's works. My favorites are "Story Book" and "Bean Stalk". "Story Book" accepts both original stories and stories based on their monthly material. My son enjoyed creating a pictograph story, where each special word is replaced by a colorful picture. "Bean Stalk" is fun because you can illustrate someone else's story, or be the author of a story for someone else's picture.

Midlink Magazine- The Write Spot The Write Spot is a section within Midlink, the electronic magazine by and for middle grade students. Submitted stories are selected for publication on the basis of originality and composition.

Cyberkids Connection A virtual place for young people from all over the world to share their thoughts and ideas with each other.

The Diary Project It is a way for young people around the world to share their personal thoughts, feelings, and dreams with one another near and far ... to ask questions and find answers about growing up at the turn of the 21st century via the Internet. Requires plug-ins.

Kids Cornfield Kidworld Magazine A good example of kids writing on the Internet, including particularly good games and puzzles in the online format.

Writing Den This is designed for students Grades 6 through 12 who want to improve their English reading, comprehension, and writing skills. Writing DEN is divided into three levels of difficulty: Words, Sentences and Paragraphs. Includes plug-ins.

Places to submit work and Contests

1. http://letswriteashortstory.com/literary-magazines/ This site offers 44 links to

submit short stories to literary magazines.

2. http://www.libraryofpoetry.com/rules.html Poetry contest for grades 3-12

3. http://www.fivestarpublications.com/kidscanpublish/contests.html Kids Can Publish offers online publishing and several contests from poetry to journalism.

4. http://www.maryamato.com/writing-contests-for-kids Contains 14 different writing contests.
5. http://www.newpages.com/npguides/young_authors_guide.htm kid/teen sites for contests, writing and publishing

HANDOUTS, NOTES, ARTICLES

The 4 basic questions of storytelling

There are 4 basic questions a screenwriter should be able to answer about their story:

1. Who is the hero?
2. What do they want?
3. What's stopping them from getting it?
4. What's at stake?

This might seem obvious to you but it was a revelation to me, and I can tell you that 90% screenplays fail these basic tests. It's not clear whose story it is, the goal isn't distinguished in a way that will allow us to know when they've crossed the finish line, the forces of antagonism aren't great enough or it doesn't matter enough to the character so why should we care?

These elements shouldn't just be obvious in your overall story but in each scene. Who wants what in this scene and why? Who is stopping them trying to get it and how do they thwart our hero?

Without these elements, you don't have conflict. No conflict, no drama. No drama, no chance of screenwriting glory.

1. Who is the hero?

It's amazing the number of scripts that don't have a clearly identified protagonist. When you ask a lot of writers the simple question, "Whose story is it?", they will say, "Well, it's his story … and it's hers too … but Fred is important too". No.

Apart from multi-strand stories (e.g. Crash), there will almost always be one primary character whose journey we are following – even in romantic comedies. In trying to identify your hero, ask yourself:

1. Who drives the action?
2. Who grows over the course of the story?
3. Who is active at the climax of the third act?

In Star Wars, the hero is Luke Skywalker even though Han Solo is the more interesting character because:

- Luke drives the action
- Luke is one who needs to trust the force
- Luke delivers the crucial shot that saves the day.

In When Harry Met Sally, it's Harry's story because he is one who needs to grow.

Even in an ensemble piece like Little Miss Sunshine, there is a hero. Richard (Greg Kinnear) is the character who has the most to grow and who is faced with the choice in Act 3 – take his daughter off the stage as ordered by the pageant matron, or get on stage and dance with her? He chooses the latter.

Having said that there is only one hero, some films separate the roles of protagonist and hero: the former drives the action and the latter exhibits the growth. e.g. In Dead Poets Society, Neil (Robert Sean Leonard) is the protagonist because he resurrects the Dead Poets Society, but Todd (Ethan Hawke) is the hero because he is the one who grows and is active in the third act.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest employs a similar structure with R.P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) as the protagonist who locks horns with the antagonistic Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) – and the Chief (Will Sampson) as the hero who grows, commits the mercy killing and is active at the climax.

And don't get hung up on that "hero" term. In Dead Man Walking, the hero is Sean Penn's character and he's a red neck rapist murderer. Sister Prejean (Susan Sarandon) is the

protagonist but he's the hero because he is the character who grows and is able to confess to his crimes before heading to his death.

So the first thing your script needs is a character who:

- drives the action to stop the audience from nodding off
- transforms so we get an emotional release at the film's climax

In most films these characters are one and the same. Who is the hero/protagonist of your screenplay?

2. What does the hero want?

What is the hero's goal? What are they going to spend the next 90 mins chasing? And it can't be peace and tranquility. They might need peace and tranquility – don't we all – but that's not an objective that's going to drive the dramatic action of the film. Your protagonist needs to have a goal, which is:

- clear
- external
- concrete

In Groundhog Day, Phil Connor's (Bill Murray's) goal is to wake up on the day after Groundhog Day (his quest for Rita (Andie McDowell) is merely a measure of his progress). In Little Miss Sunshine, it's to get to Olive to the junior beauty pageant in Redondo Beach. In The Hangover, it's to find the groom.

What is your hero's external goal?

3. What's stopping them from getting it?

Drama is conflict. I'll say it again, lest you skip over it. Drama is conflict. Conflict for breakfast, conflict for lunch and the mother of all battles for dinner. Even in love scenes, you want an element of conflict. So it's not enough that you have a hero and they want something. There needs to be something or someone – preferably both – standing in their way.

These forces of opposition can come in several forms:

- the formidableness of their antagonist
- the ill preparedness of the hero
- the flaw of the hero

- the hostility of the environment
- time – or the lack there of

Of these, the antagonist is almost always the most important. A hero can't become great unless they overcome a great antagonist. That's why Schindler's achievement is so great – because Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes) is such a psychopath. It's why Hannibal Lecter makes The Silence of the Lambs. It's also why There Will Be Blood ultimately disappoints – because Eil Sunday (Paul Dano) is no match for Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day Lewis).

What monumental forces are marshaled between your hero and their goal?

4. What's at stake?

This is where a lot of screenplays fall down. They might have a hero and they might have a goal and they might have an antagonist but there is nothing at stake. Why is that a problem? Because we just won't care. And if we don't care, how keen are we going to be to sit and watch events unfold over the next 90 minutes? Not very. Stakes are absolutely crucial.

To see whether you have enough at stake, ask yourself, how will your hero's life be different if they don't achieve this goal? Would it be an unimaginably horrible fate? It should be.

Death is the ultimate stake. In war movies and thrillers (e.g. North by Northwest), the hero is almost always risking their life.

Liberty is another high stake. e.g. In The Fugitive, Richard Kimble (Harrison Ford) needs to find the one-armed murderer of his wife or he'll spend the rest of his life behind bars. But stakes don't need to be of that order to make us care.

In An Officer and a Gentleman, there is the famous scene where Sergeant Foley (Lou Gossett Jr) pushes Zac Mayo (Richard Gere) to breaking point. He threatens to expel him from the program and Zac's too-cool-for-school veneer finally cracks: "Don't you … don't you … I've got nothing else … I've got nothing … ". His mother committed suicide, his father is "an alcoholic and woman chaser", and if he fails to complete his officer training, the same fate awaits Zac. What's at stake? His one chance at a decent life.

In romantic comedies, the stakes are "only" love. So we need to feel that the hero's life will be empty and barren if they aren't able to get it together with the object of their ardent affection.

Are the stakes in your screenplay sufficiently high to make us care?

Did you get 4 out 4?

That's it. Just 4 basic questions:

- Who is the hero?
- What do they want?
- What's stopping them from getting it?
- What's at stake?

Yet most screenplays either don't supply answers or they supply answers that won't satisfy an audience. That's the tricky bit – being objective enough in assessing your work to answer the question, "Will the audience go on this journey with my character?"

If your screenplay does supply good solid answers to these 4 questions, believe me, your screenplay is already in the top 10% of scripts. You're possibly still some distance from Oscar-winner but at least you've got the basics in place.

9 TRICKS TO WRITING SUSPENSE FICTION

Your heart is slamming against your rib cage, your fingertips are moist and you turn another page. The antagonist is setting up a trap. You wish you could do something to prevent the protagonist from walking into it, but you can't. You're helpless, totally at the mercy of the writer. All you can do is turn another page.

If you've ever felt this way reading a book, then the writer has done a great job of creating suspense. If you continue to feel this way until the last page, the writer has also done a great job maintaining it. That's no easy feat, as you'll discover when trying to write a suspense thriller. But here are some hints to get you started.

Understanding the genre

First, you need to understand how the suspense genre is different from the mystery genre. These two genres are family, but more like cousins than brother and sister. The key difference is perspective. Both genres deal with a crisis event to hook the reader and keep the story going. But the storytelling approach is completely different.

Let's say the crisis is the assassination of the president of the United States. In a mystery, the president would die in the first chapter, and the rest of the book would focus on the government agents charged with finding the killer and bringing him to justice. In a suspense story, an intercepted communiqué or a bungled weapons drop would take place in the first chapter, alerting the White House of an imminent presidential assassination threat. This time, the government agents would be charged with protecting the president while tracking down the would-be assassin. The story would climax at the point where the

assassination attempt is thwarted. In a nutshell, suspense creates drama before the crisis event while mystery starts its thrill ride after the crisis event.

For a good suspense story to work, what's at stake must be stated at the beginning of the story. Think of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels. At the beginning of each story, the reader knows who 007 is up against and what deadly plan he has to stop. While a mystery writer plays his cards close to his chest, giving little away to tease the reader, Fleming plays his cards open for all to see. In doing so, he—and any suspense writer—takes a risk. By establishing what's at stake early, some of the story's sense of drama can be easily lost because the reader knows important details, such as who, why and when. This is what makes suspense writing a challenge. Playing with an open hand, the suspense writer must create tension by inserting a strong protagonist and developing inventive story developments that avert a certain outcome.

While some might think suspense writing is tough to pull off, it's worth noting that the genre allows the writer a number of freedoms not afforded to the mystery writer. Suspense writers can employ multiple point-of-view characters. They can present the bad guy and his motivations to give the reader insight into his character. This allows the writer to perfectly pit his antagonist and protagonist against each other. Mystery writers can't do this. They can write books employing multiple point-of-view characters but never that of the antagonist. They must purposely keep the antagonist's identity hidden to maintain the mystery.

Nine tricks to try

Suspense is a hard discipline to master, but the following tips will help to ensure a thrilling experience for the reader:

1. Give the reader a lofty viewpoint. The reader should have foresight. Let the reader see the viewpoints of both the protagonist and the antagonist. By giving the reader a ringside seat to the story's developments, she gets to see the trouble before the protagonist does. The reader sees the lines of convergence between the protagonist and antagonist and feels the consequences of the perils ahead. Also, this technique allows the writer to place emotional weight on the reader. The tension will build from the reader's self-imposed fears of knowing that the hero is on a collision course with disaster.

2. Use time constraints. Another key way to build suspense is through the use of time. The protagonist should be working against the clock, and the clock should be working for the bad guys. In Robert Ludlum and Gayle Lynds' *The Altman Code*, Covert One agent Jon Smith has only days to prove the Chinese are sending chemical weapon materials to Iraq. In Greg Iles' *24 Hours*, Will and Karen Jennings have one day to escape their captors to rescue their child from a kidnapper. Every minute you shortchange the protagonist is another notch up on the burner under the reader's seat.

3. Keep the stakes high. This doesn't necessarily mean the story's hook has to be about global

annihilation. But the story must be about a crisis that's devastating to the protagonist's world, and the hero must be willing to do anything to prevent it from occurring. Therefore, the story could be about a father trying to rescue his wife and child from an impending flood, or an innocent man who's framed for murder going on the run to establish his innocence. The crisis has to be important to ensure readers will empathize with the protagonist.

4. Apply pressure. The protagonist should be working under what seems to be insurmountable odds. All his skills and strengths must be stretched to the breaking point in order to save the day. The hero should bend, but never buckle under the pressure the antagonist applies. There should be only one person left feeling helpless in the story, and that's the reader.

5. Create dilemmas. Suspense loves a dilemma. The antagonist needs to be throwing things at the protagonist that present awkward challenges or choices that will test her caliber. The choice must seemingly be a lose-lose situation for the protagonist. This may take the form of choosing to save one person while leaving another to die, picking up a gun after swearing an oath never to do so again or taking that offered drink after years of sobriety.

The antagonist, by his nature, will cross lines without a second's thought, while fully conscious of his actions. But the protagonist is a different breed—as a hero, he can't let innocent people die without a fight, or stray from his morals or promises. The great thing about dilemmas is that they need time to be solved, and with the pressure of time constraints, the tension can only build. So test, tease and tempt the protagonist.

6. Complicate matters. Pile on the problems. Give the protagonist more things to do than he can handle. The hero has to be stretched wafer-thin. If you've ever seen one of those old music-hall acts where spinning plates are perched on top of flimsy bamboo poles, and there's some poor guy running himself ragged trying to keep all the plates from crashing down, well, that's how it should be for the protagonist. The hero should be that guy trying to keep all those plates spinning, while the antagonist is forever adding another plate to the line. By the end of the book, the protagonist should be just barely preventing everything from crashing to the ground.

Let's use *The Altman Code* and *24 Hours* as examples again. In *The Altman Code*, Jon Smith's problems are further complicated by having to break the president's father out of a Chinese prison camp. In *24 Hours*, Will and Karen Jennings' daughter is diabetic, and the kidnappers don't have her insulin. Both these examples add another layer of complication to their respective stories.

7. Be unpredictable. Nothing in life runs perfectly to plan for anyone. Make nothing straight-forward for the protagonist. The hero shouldn't be able to rely on anything going right for her, and any step forward should come at a price. The antagonist shouldn't go unscathed, either.

In Newtonian physics, for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction. The sheer presence of the protagonist is going to gum up the antagonist's plans, which means the antagonist is going to have to

improvise. Both players will have to be quick-witted to deal with any and all upsets, especially as the story progresses toward its climax. Remember, the protagonist and antagonist don't have to be the only monkey wrench in each other's lives. Let outside forces be that, too. These characters might be locked in a do-or-die battle, but the rest of the world isn't. Friends, neighbors, deliverymen and even public holidays can all be flies in the ointment. And don't forget Mother Nature herself. A great illustration of this is the opening of Robert Crais' *Demolition Angel*, where two bomb disposal experts are trying to defuse a bomb—and an earthquake occurs. Brilliant! Essentially, keep that storyline fluid. The reader might know what the story's end game is, but this doesn't mean they should know how it's going to get there.

8. Create a really good villain. In a mystery, the villain has to be somewhat transparent because you don't want the reader to catch on to who she is too quickly. But in a suspense novel, the bad guy is very visible. A great villain isn't someone who twirls a handlebar moustache and ties damsels to railway tracks. The ultimate antagonists are smart and motivated. They have to be to have created this spectacular hook that's going to keep readers riveted to their La-Z-Boys for the length of a book. Flesh this person out. Explore the antagonist's motivations and character. Give the reader reasons why the antagonist is who he is. The reader has to believe in and fear this person. The villain has to be a worthy opponent to our hero. Anything else won't do.

9. Create a really good hero. If the book has a great bad guy, then it's going to need a great hero. This may be key to any story, but the suspense hero has to be someone the reader believes in and cares about. When the hero is in peril, the writer needs for the reader to hope that person will pull through.

Suspense writing is all about creating a pressure cooker with no relief valve. You have to keep turning up the heat using multiple burners. Employ these techniques and your reader will never come off the boil.

Ten Tips for Building Suspense in a Novel

What makes you come back to that novel sitting on your bed stand night after night? Is there a powerful reason to keep reading it other than the fact that you paid money for the darn book and you don't want it to go to waste?

For some readers, it's curiosity. Once they've committed to a novel, they have to know what happens, period. For others, it's a compelling character that makes them laugh every time he shows up. Or perhaps they have fallen in love with the author's voice.

For me, it's the plot. The not knowing what's going to happen next. But there are two caveats for the story to hold my interest: either the plot has to be somewhat unpredictable or the premise must pose a "big question" that keeps me hooked until the end of the novel.

As writers, we have an arsenal of tools at our disposal to help construct our plots. Perhaps one of our best tools is suspense.

Suspense, the antidote for boredom

Suspense is what will keep your readers guessing and coming back to your book until they reach the end. (And I don't mean a thriller. Suspense should be found in any genre.) But injecting intrigue in your plot can be tricky. It must be handled with care for too much of it could make the reader confused and frustrated, and too little could bore him to tears. Finding the perfect balance is one of the hardest things we writers have to learn. A few years ago, I took an excellent writing class called Revising Fiction. The instructor, Kirt Hickman, recommends a series of practical tips for building tension in a novel. I have adapted and condensed the ones I've found most helpful.

1. Surprise/mislead the reader. Who doesn't love surprises? Especially when we think we know exactly where a story is going. If a character does or says something unexpected, the reader will be shaken (or at the very least awakened from his blissful sleep.) The archetypal shapeshifter works wonderfully for this purpose. Surprises can range from having a character smile at someone before smacking him across the face, to having a trusted friend betray your innocent hero. Surprises can also come in the form of well-guarded secrets exposed at the right time.

2. Have a ruthless/powerful antagonist. Powerful doesn't necessarily mean "rich." It could just be someone who has many advantages over the heroine (beauty, confidence, the love interest's affection, etc.) Hickman recommends an especially violent character, but I think it really depends on what genre you're writing. If your book is lighter, a violent character obviously doesn't belong, but you can still have an antagonist powerful enough to torment the main character (and the reader!)

3. The nightmare comes true. Though we may feel inclined to protect our characters (they're our babies, after all), the truth is that when things go too smoothly it can be very boring for the reader. Remember what Leo Tolstoy wrote at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In other words, bad things should happen to your protagonist (whether you like it or not.) Think of the worst thing that could happen to your main character. Now do it. (This can include taking away the thing that she values the most—be it an object, a loved one, a job, etc.) Think about Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*. She loses her parents, her slaves, her money, her childhood crush (Ashley), her daughter and her true love (Rhett).

4. Give your character a phobia/fear to confront. When a particular phobia or weakness is established early on in the text, it can be a good pay off for the reader when the character is forced to confront it.

This could represent (when done right) a great moment of tension in the story. (Just picture your reader with her fingers clutching the pages of your book. Now that's a beautiful image!)Think of Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo." The protagonist, Scottie (played by James Stewart), suffers from acrophobia and has to confront it twice to save the woman he loves. He fails the first time but succeeds the second time.

The same goes for the protagonist of "Jaws" (Roy Scheider.) The one thing he fears the most is the water. He could have let the marine biologist and the professional shark hunter go after the killer shark attacking the beach-goers in his small shore town, but his strong sense of duty forces him to go with them. In the end, he has to confront both the shark and the ocean after the boat is destroyed.

5. Show the danger is real.

The reader won't worry too much about your main character if you're constantly sheltering her from tragedy. In order to warn the reader that bad things may in fact happen to the protagonist, you must show the danger is real and can reach anyone. How do you do this? By hurting your main character or killing someone whom she cares about (as painful as that may be for you, gulp.) This raises the hero's personal stakes and gives you an opportunity to include an emotional moment in your novel.

6. Never make things easy for your main character. Have you noticed that us human-types don't usually appreciate things that are easily attained? (Remember when your mom/grandmother told you to "play hard to get" with that guy you liked? Well, she said it for a reason! It's human nature to want those things we can't have.) The same is true for our characters. If their goals come to them effortlessly, they won't value them as much as if they suffer to get them (neither will your reader.) If readers witness the many obstacles the protagonist must overcome to achieve her goal, they will cheer for her when she succeeds in the end.

7. Include an external circumstance or event beyond the character's control. Think about the movie "Titanic." Remember how the imminent sinking of the ship added suspense and tension to an otherwise predictable plot? I watched this movie in the theatre and not a peep was heard during those harsh scenes where masses of characters were dying and there was nothing Rose could do to change her situation.

This doesn't mean that every novel should have a natural disaster. Other external incidents can include wars, epidemics, political factors (ruthless dictators, protests, etc.) or economical circumstances (think "The Pursuit of Happiness" or "Angela's Ashes.")

8. Haunt your character with a past failure. Characters should have flaws. We all know that. But if you include a past failure, it will add another layer to your story. The character will seem more real if the reader believes that the hero had a past before the novel started. Especially if this bad experience still affects his present decisions and his confidence to succeed in whatever mission he's now encountering. Insecurities in characters are a good thing because as readers, we want to see them become stronger and grow.**9. Impose a deadline.**Do you hold your breath when you watch your favorite athlete

(team, horse, loved one) during a race? Does your pulse quicken? Are you unable or unwilling to take your eyes away from the competition? (Even if you don't watch any sports, humor me please.) Well, the same thing happens when a beloved character must beat a ticking clock to achieve an objective (especially if the consequences of not making it on time are disastrous.) There doesn't always have to be a clock (though some novels/films use this element.) What matters is that you create a sense of urgency and transmit it to your reader. If you ever saw the movie "Nick of Time", starring Johnny Depp, you know exactly what I mean. A less literal example is the film "Poseidon". The characters are on a race against time to reach the top (in this case, the bottom) of the ship before it drowns. Many romantic comedies use this device, too. The protagonist must reach the love interest before she marries someone else or gets on a plane that will take her to a faraway land (for good!)

10. Add a final twist near the end of the novel. Ideally, endings shouldn't be predictable. The contradiction is that they shouldn't be inconsistent with the plot, either. In other words, you shouldn't write a tragic ending in your romantic comedy only because you don't want the audience to predict the outcome. What you could do is come up with one surprise or twist for the reader that in retrospect seems inevitable. The reader should finish the book realizing that it couldn't have ended any other way. An excellent example that Hickman offered in class is the movie "Shrek." We all know that Princess Fiona and Shrek will end up together (inevitable). The twist is that instead of Fiona staying a beautiful princess forever, she turns into an ogre, just like Shrek (surprise.) Upon reflection, we realize that an ogre and a princess wouldn't have fit well together. Fiona had to become an ogre. Surprising inevitability. Perhaps this last caveat is what makes endings so difficult. There must be a balance between giving the reader a satisfactory ending, but making it unique enough so that the reader can't predict every bit of dialogue to the letter. Use a combination of suspense builders that seem appropriate for your story and genre. Many successful novels and films do. Just take a look at this year's Oscar-winning film "The King's Speech" and you'll find many of them.

Adding Humor to a Story http://www.lisahistoricals.com/A_Humor.html

Do you enjoy reading a humorous story? I do. I also enjoy writing them. As a matter of fact, I don't think I could write a totally serious story if my life depended on it. Often, I have people who ask me how I come up with the zany things that occur in my stories. It's not totally accidental, though sometimes my characters do surprise me. Adding humor to a manuscript must be planned just as thoroughly as any other aspect of the story. All authors have their own methods, but if you want your manuscript to be humorous, the following tips might help.

Types of Humor

Let's start by identifying the main types of humor.

Lower level: This is the type of humor that requires the least amount of understanding from the audience. Puns and physical humor fall into this category. Even a baby will laugh at a funny face or slapstick style pranks. Jokes about socially taboo subjects are also in this level. There are many comedians who have entire routines about bodily functions and non-politically correct jokes, and their audiences laugh like crazy.

This is not saying that lower level humor is not appreciated--quite the contrary. In my book TEXAS HOLD HIM my hero names a horse a very inappropriate thing, mostly just to embarrass the heroine. It's a social taboo, for sure, but what's the first thing my readers tell me they loved about the book? You guessed it, the poor horse's name and my heroine's reaction to it.

Middle level: This humor category involves an understanding of the reader, but not on a deep intellectual level. A standard knock-knock joke would be an example of middle level humor. Most people will understand it and see why it's funny. Other examples of this would be one liners, quips and things quickly understood by all.

Higher level: Parodies, satire and sarcasm all fall into this level. It's the riskiest type of humor to put into a book because not all readers will "get it". It usually involves references to things that require some exposure or education to the topic in order for it to be funny. It's also risky to use sarcasm in a novel because it can come across as nasty or caustic. If you have a character who uses sarcasm in a bantering sort of way, you want to be careful that your reader doesn't perceive him as mean. One way to temper that is to use tags that show he/she is teasing. (IE: the corner of his mouth lifted in a subtle grin or her eyes twinkled playfully) Avoid tagging it as she said sarcastically unless you want it to come across caustic. Just the word "sarcastic" has a negative connotation for most readers.

Perhaps the highest level of humor would be esoteric. It requires intelligence and a keen wit to understand and without the nuances facial expression and tone gives, it can often be overlooked by a quick reader. It fits well, however, with niche fiction.

Implementing Humor

Now that we've identified the major types of humor, how do we work that into a manuscript?

Characters: I heard Jenny Cruise say that when she travels she collects squirrels. Not the fuzzy kind that eats nuts, but the human kind that really is nuts. She watches for unusual people and makes mental notes on what they do that makes them funny then she uses those traits for secondary characters in her books. It's a great technique largely because we've all seen those squirrels, so when they are introduced in a book, we immediately have a mental picture to associate with the character which makes them funny.

The personalities of the hero and heroine can also make for wonderful humor fodder in a novel. Selecting two very different personalities can open loads of opportunity for funny scenes. I am particularly fond of exasperation on either my hero or heroine's part. I also enjoy having the characters think one thing while saying another or even better, one character thinks they're pulling something over on the other, but when we switch POV's the reader learns that the other character knows exactly what's going on.

If you want a humorous novel, consider creating secondary characters that are there mostly for the purpose of making scenes funny. Give them some kind of personality trait that lends itself to fun. For example: a butler who is hard of hearing, a grandmother who collects firearms, or an uncle who thinks he's the reincarnation of Napoleon. Or better yet, put all of those in one novel and stand back. I guarantee something will happen.

Situational humor: This is where physical humor can be used pretty easily. The hero suddenly finds himself locked out of his apartment wearing nothing but boxer shorts and one tennis shoe, and a group of nuns are walking down the street toward him. Some of you are grinning at that already even though there is no hint of the actual scene or dialogue. Something about picturing the absurd is funny.

Maybe your heroine mistakenly thinks the hero is a gay interior designer she called to redecorate her offices instead of the very straight architect who designed the building. You can take it from there.

In both examples, it's the situation that makes it funny. If the hero was fully clothed or no one was walking toward him, it wouldn't hold nearly the potential.

Conversational humor:

Dialogue: the backbone of most novels and the showcase for your character's wit and intelligence. Sometimes referred to as banter, it's the prime opportunity for you to show how your characters interact with each other. As with movies or stage productions, the key to pulling this off is timing. Use tags and movements to space the comments appropriately so the rhythm of the banter is not lost. If one character says something and the other quips back a reply, don't put narrative in between or the reader will miss what the quip was in reference to.

Thoughts: Probably my favorite way to add humor. I love to have my characters think analogies as a scene is unfolding. In my book TEXAS HOLD HIM, my heroine asks a rather annoying female acquaintance a question then "braces" for the answer. She thinks to herself that asking Eloise a question was like priming a pump. We all know people like that and even though the other character is unaware of the heroine's thoughts, the reader knows and is probably grinning as she thinks of someone she knows who is just like Eloise.

Words of Caution

Do not make your hero or heroine into a buffoon. If you want a goofy character in your book, make it a secondary character. A romance reader wants to fall in love with the hero and be the heroine. Not too many people want to fall in love with a buffoon.

If you are not a funny person, do not attempt to add humor to your books. Do people often laugh at things you say? Do people tell you you're clever? If not, the chances of you simply coming up with wit in your novel are slim.

If the scene does not make you laugh when you're writing it, it will not make the reader laugh when she's reading it either.

Remember your audience. If you are writing romance, your reader is most likely an adult female. She will appreciate humor directed toward or about men, children, housework, fashion…you get the picture. It's usually an easy task for a woman writer. Think about what you and your friends laugh about when you get together. Your reader will think those things are funny too.

In A MIDWIFE CRISIS the five-year-old daughter of my hero is singing in the church Christmas pageant when she notices the little boy beside her is plucking feathers from her wings. She reacts as any five-year-old angel would by clobbering him in front of God and everybody--situational, physical humor that almost any mom would identify with.

Don't add humor in inappropriate places. If a scene is tense and wrought with emotion, don't throw in humor. It will jar the reader out of the scene and out of the story. Decide the tone you want for the scene before you start and stay consistent. If you want to add humor to a love scene, remember you are going to sacrifice sexual tension by doing so.

Don't underestimate your reader. When I first started writing, I tempered almost everything I wrote because I was afraid no one would think it was funny except me. When I finally turned off my internal censor, I sold.

While it's true that not all readers will enjoy your sense of humor or your style, there are sure to be many who will. The key is to be true to yourself, keep giggling, and keep writing.

HOW TO WRITE BETTER USING HUMOR

http://www.writersdigest.com/whats-new/how-to-mix-humor-into-your-writing

A man walks into a bookstore. "Where's the self-help section?" he asks the clerk. She shrugs and replies, "If I tell you, won't that defeat the purpose?" —Anonymous

Humor is an integral part of our everyday interactions, whether we're trying to navigate a bookstore, make conversation with the barista at our favorite coffee shop, or talk a police officer out of a ticket. Our inherent desire to laugh motivates us to share funny YouTube videos and respond to text messages with an LOL or the iconic smiley face. Many of us even choose to get our daily news with a heaping side order of comedy from outlets like "The Daily Show," "The Colbert Report" or *The Onion*. When push comes to punch, we'd rather laugh than lie facedown, weeping into the carpet.

You may think that when it comes to writing, humor is best used only in fiction or satire. But while we think of comedy in terms of exaggeration or fabrication, effective humor can be just as much about creative misdirection—engaging readers by taking them someplace they don't expect to go—and subtly choosing metaphors and words that make readers giggle without even knowing why. And a smiling reader is one who's paying attention and eager to read on.

Sociologists, linguists and biologists say that our ability to laugh and desire to do so isn't all fun and games, but actually serves two essential life functions: to bond with members of our "tribe," and to lessen tension and anxiety. Both of these are also excellent reasons to incorporate humor in your nonfiction. As a communication tool, effective use of humor can humanize you, cementing your bond with readers. It can also help your work stand out in a crowded market. And as advertising studies have shown, humor enhances how much we like what we're reading and how well we remember it afterward.

I've been teaching humor writing for 16 years, and have used my funny bone in writing everything from self-help books to feature articles to essays to cookbook content. I'm convinced that learning to effectively use humor can not only enhance your work, but can make the act of writing more enjoyable, too. Trying to find the funnier side of things reduces the loneliness, rejection and stress of the writing life—and it boosts your creativity by challenging you to approach your craft in new ways.

Even if your subject is a serious one, the subtle use of humor can both ease tension and provide a respite from difficult moments. I was recently hired to provide freelance assistance on a book about pornography-related problems. The authors felt I could make the subject less uncomfortable for readers by lightening things up here and there. As Eric Idle once wisely said, "Levity is the opposite of gravity."

So how can *you* use humor to write better?

Learning the Basics of Subtle Humor

Let's be clear: The goal in adding some humor to your nonfiction project is not about becoming the next Erma Bombeck or David Sedaris (unless that's your dream). The goal is to improve your writing by using all the tools available to you, including comedy. Imagine where the original authors of the For Dummies book franchise would be today if they hadn't decided to take a lighthearted approach.

Whether or not you consider yourself a funny person, it's not as difficult as you might think to put humor to work for you. I've found that the easiest and best ways of doing so boil down to five simple comedic tools.

1. THE K RULE: It may sound strange, but it's true: Words with the k sound (Cadillac, quintuplet, sex) are perceived as the funniest, and words with a hard g (guacamole, gargantuan, Yugo) create almost as many grins. This may be because much of what makes Americans laugh today has roots in Yiddish humor, the language of which includes many guttural sounds—and the k and hard g are as close as English comes. The K Rule is so widely used by comedy writers that Matt Groening's team once referenced it in an episode of "The Simpsons" when Sideshow Mel explained that Krusty (note spelling) the Clown had laryngitis from "trying to cram too many k sounds into a punch line."

The K Rule is a good convention for naming things and making word choices that will subconsciously or subtly amuse your readers. This tool is especially handy in crafting attention-grabbing titles or subheads. Consider this memorable section heading in the book *You Staying Young: The Owner's Manual for Extending Your Warranty* by Michael F. Roizen and Mehmet C. Oz: "Your Memory: Don't Fuggedaboudit."

2. THE RULE OF THREE: Writing comedically usually requires establishing a pattern (with the setup) and then misdirecting the reader (with the punch line). One simple way of doing this is to pair two like ideas in a list and then add a third, incongruent, idea. The reason we use a list of three, and not five or 27, is that three is the number of things we can most easily remember (two if we haven't yet had our coffee or been tasered awake by our boss). Here's an example of a sentence using the Rule of Three: *Losing weight is simple: Eat less, exercise more and pay NASA to let you live in an anti-gravity chamber*.

This is one of the most flexible ways to naturally incorporate humor into your narrative. It's particularly useful in crafting catchy article leads, like this opening paragraph from Jean Chatzky's "Interest Rates Are Going Up. Now What?" in *More*:

Let me predict a few things that will happen in the next year. Brad and Angelina will add another baby to their brood. The day you spend $175 getting your hair done is the day it will rain. And the variable-interest rates—on your savings account, mortgage and credit card—will go up.

Here she uses two amusing, less important ideas as the pattern and throws in her point at the end, as the "punch."

3. THE COMPARISON JOKE: As writers, we're comfortable with metaphors, so think of comparison jokes as simply metaphors chosen specifically for comedic effect. Here's an example from the late Robert Schimmel's memoir *Cancer on $5 a Day* (*Chemo Not Included)*:

… this stupid hospital gown is riding up my ass. I try to pull it down and it snaps right back up like a window shade. I cross my legs and suddenly I'm Sharon Stone.

To craft a comparison joke, simply brainstorm metaphors and then choose the one that is funniest and makes the point well. For example, if you want to convey that quitting smoking is difficult, you might first mentally list things that are tough, such as reading without your glasses, flossing a cat's teeth, getting a teen to tell you about his day, getting a cat to tell you about its day while flossing its teeth, etc. Then, simply choose the comparison that makes you laugh. In comedy writing, we're always our first audience.

3. THE CLICHÉ JOKE: If comedy relies on misdirection, what better way to achieve it than with a phrase your readers already know? If you write, "You can lead a horse to water …" every reader will assume you're going to finish with "… but you can't make him drink." Taking the cliché elsewhere can be both attention-grabbing and amusing. Take the title of Sarah Snell Cooke's *Credit Union Times* article about a credit union initiative dubbed THINK: "You Can Lead a Horse to Water But You Can't Make Him THINK."

Don't limit yourself to old idioms: Cliché jokes can work with any widely known catchphrase, title, lyric or piece of literature (say, Dr. Seuss). Lyla Blake Ward's book *How to Succeed at Aging Without Really Dying*, for example, is titled with a play on the well-known musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. You also don't need to confine your creativity to just replacing a word or two. Taking a cliché and expanding upon it is another useful approach. For example, on Lauren Kessler's companion blog to her latest book, ***My Teenage Werewolf***, she writes:

I will always, always have your back. That's the one message above all other messages (even the I love you message) that I want Lizzie and my two sons to hear. … How do I manage to send that message and not simultaneously send this one: *I am available, at your beck and call, 24/7. Don't even think about what else I might have on my plate or who I am as a person in addition to being your mother. I have no life other than to serve you.*

5. FUNNY ANECDOTES AND STORIES: Most of the things we laugh at in real life are true stories, sometimes exaggerated for effect. In fact, experts say we laugh far more at these types of everyday happenings than at "jokes." It makes sense, then, to use them to help illustrate your points as you write. When *Your Money or Your Life* authors Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin wanted to demonstrate the importance of changing the way we think about money, they did so by telling the story of a young girl watching her mother prepare a ham to bake for dinner. As the mother cut both ends off the ham, the daughter asked why. Mom replied that her mother had always done it that way. When the daughter still insisted on knowing why, a quick call to grandma revealed the reason: "Because the pan was too small."

Putting It Into Practice: Now you've got five basic comedic tools in your arsenal, and you're ready to put them to use in your work. As with trying anything new, you don't want to overdo it and come on too strong, but you don't want to stifle your creativity, either. Here are five ways to effectively apply what you've learned to any kind of nonfiction work:

1. **BE STRATEGIC.** Don't scatter jokes willy-nilly; instead, think of humor as parenthetical information. Many nonfiction writers find the best places to integrate humor are in titles, sidebars, visual illustrations or cartoons, and anecdotes to illustrate their points. For a great example of the use of visual humor, see Roizen and Oz's *You Staying Young*.

2. **USE IT SPARINGLY.** Unless you're writing about an inherently funny topic, you should limit the humor you use to selective references. Its purpose is to grab the reader's attention and help you make points in creative ways. Don't confuse the reader by coming across as a comedian.

3. **KEEP YOUR FOCUS IN MIND.** Be sure your use of humor doesn't distract from or demean the true purpose of your project. Have someone read your manuscript and then give you a candid critique with this in mind.

4. **LET YOUR READERS KNOW YOU'RE LAUGHING.** When using humor in writing about a difficult subject—your own illness, for example—your first responsibility is to give your readers permission to laugh. Find subtle ways to let them know that not only is it OK to laugh, but you want them to.

5. **STEER CLEAR OF SARCASM.** This humor style may work in some arenas, but many readers find it hurtful and mean, and because it often relies on tone, it can be especially hard to pull off in writing. Sarcasm is a tool most of us pick up at a young age as a way of feeling better about ourselves by putting others down. I recommend leaving it there.

As writers, it's up to us to use everything we can to make sure we lasso our readers and keep them in the corral. Don't let fear of being funny on the page hold you back. After all, I wasn't class clown in high school. In fact, had there been such a category, I would have been voted Most Likely to Depress People (Sylvia Plath and Edgar Allan Poe were my role models). But I've learned that an old saying is true: "If you can get them to open their mouths to laugh, you can get them to open their hearts to learn." And *that* makes for effective writing.

Humor: A Key to Story Success

By Linda Gorham

Here is the good news. About 35% of you reading this have the ability to "think funny." Congratulations! Of course, conversely the rest of you fall into the 65% of people who do not. Sorry. Nevertheless, do not fear, there is hope. It is possible to expand the "think funny" or humor quotient for those of you in the 35% category, and to open the humor horizons for the rest of you.

Think about the people who have good penmanship, beautiful gardens, or perfect hair. Their skills did not come by chance. They consciously worked on them. I believe it is the same with humor; we can learn to be humorous or more humorous – if we work at it.

I enjoy storytellers and presenters who are humorous. Simply put, humorous stories and presentations keep my attention. When I anticipate humorous interjections in a story, I'm more alert because I don't want to miss anything.

There's more! I'm more attracted to humorous presenters. I want to talk to them after the presentation. I want to have lunch with them. I want to be their friend. I will travel farther to hear them. Now, are you ready for this last justification? I will pay more to hear them. Did I get your attention?

"People will pay more to be entertained than educated." --Steve Allen, comedian

My personal definition of humor is "seeing life sideways." A more formal definition is that humor is the capacity to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny, amusing, incongruous, and ludicrous. Humor:

Uncovers the absurd and the incongruous

Finds unusual associations and consequences

Arouses amusement and exposes the unexpected

Easy? Not necessarily. Truth is, even humor has rules.

Rule number one: make sure your audience is ready for humor; they must be in a funny state of mind. If you have a set of your own, include your most humorous story after one that builds up or develops the humor quotient of your audience. If you are part of an olio, inform your emcee so he or she can use a segue that prepares your audience for a funny story.

Rule number two: don't poke fun at anyone who may be considered vulnerable. Authority figures such as teachers, bosses, and government officials are safe. Also, people your audience will feel are smarter, better looking, luckier or richer than they are. Be careful; to be truly safe, poke fun at yourself.

Rule number three: know your audience. You want your stories and your humor to be appropriate for the age, sex, demographics, interests, political leanings, and even the idiosyncrasies of your audience. People won't laugh at issues that go over their heads or don't relate to them.

"Laughter comes primarily from our emotions, not from our intellect. You can never get an unsophisticated audience to appreciate sophisticated quips, but many an intellectual audience has laughed uproariously at very unsophisticated material."

Rule number four: successful humor requires honesty and sincerity. Don't try for a laugh, just deliver your lines and allow your audience to "take them or leave them." I like to think of successful humor as a special gift delivered with love. "Like a welcome summer rain, humor may suddenly cleanse and cool the earth, the air and you." --Langston Hughes

You can incorporate humor in your stories by using good word choice, appropriate emphasis, timing, silence, pauses, vocal variety, non-verbal reactions, and body gestures. In addition, it may seem obvious, but don't forget to smile. Smiling sets a tone of joy. It also lets people know they can take what you just said lightly. In addition to delivery techniques, you may also want to try the following humor techniques:

- **Anachronisms or misdating** – incorporate references into your story that don't fit the time frame.
- **Asides** – add comments that appear casual as if you were just reminded of them. Most effective speaker humor is planned, even if it appears spontaneous.
- **Banter** – use dialogue to make communication livelier.
- **Blendwords** – coin your own words to fit the image you want to project.
- **Callbacks** – make a second or third reference to something funny you said earlier. The original comment must have gotten a laugh and must be able to stand on its own.
- **Catch Phrases** – insert a common phrase in an extraordinary manner.
- **Catch Tales** – mislead your listeners by implying a dreadful ending and then surprising them with a sudden trivial conclusion. This describes the classic jump tale.
- **Comparisons** – use similes and metaphors to describe something by likening it to something else. When planning your comparisons, aim for those that are outrageous and ludicrous
- **Double entendre** – use phrases that have double meanings – at least to those with twisted minds.
- **Fractured or Twisted Fairy Tales** – everyone loves a creative twist on an old tale.
- **Irony** – use words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of, the literal meaning.
- **Malapropisms** – misuse a word in a most ludicrous way, especially by confusion with another one that has a similar sound.
- **Puns –** use a word or words that are formed alike or sound alike but have different meanings.
- **Props –** use selective props. If not overdone, they can add more than words can ever say.
- **Rhyming** – add creative rhymes. Rhyming is a high-level type of humor, but the audience can appreciate it in small doses.
- **Rug Pulls** – use a series of three to provide a surprise. Usually the first two items make sense; the third is completely incongruous.
- **Twist Wits** – mutilate quotations, quotes, famous sayings, and proverbs by adding fresh, creative extensions.

- Finally, give your audience **time** to laugh. All of your humorous techniques and delivery will fall flat if you don't allow your audience time to enjoy your humor.

THE SECRET OF WRITING FUNNY by Annie Binns

Do you want to learn the secrets of writing funny? Check out the five tips below.

Laughter has instantaneous health benefits including relaxation, lowering blood pressure, curing male pattern baldness and increasing immune system response.

Almost all of these health benefits can all be obtained by making your reader giggle, laugh, guffaw or otherwise shoot beverages out an unexpected orifice.

Before I share a few of the methods you can use to add humor to your writing, I'd like to digress for a moment by predicting and addressing your objections.

"I've just never been a very funny person."

Have you ever laughed at something? A sense of humor is a bi-directional feature. If you can laugh, you can make someone else laugh.

"I write about stuff that is serious."

Surprising your readers with a chuckle in the midst of a serious discussion is a terrific way to build a loyal following. Notice I said chuckle – after all, this is serious stuff.

"When I try to be funny, nobody gets it."

You're trying too hard. Stop that.

"I'm a writer. I don't tell jokes."

The rules of good writing also apply to humor. Show, don't tell.

"But, I write poetry | fiction | a blog | non-fiction | essays | on bathroom walls | screenplays."

Perfect!

Humor isn't one-size-fits-all, but there are several techniques you can use to drag a smile out of almost anyone

Tip #1: Be the joke. There's only one way to make fun of something without offending anyone else, and that's if you're making fun of yourself. Your readers will welcome the invitation to laugh with you. This applies to poking fun at your accouterments as well – parents, spouses, siblings, children, dogs, hamsters and fish. Never make fun of the cat.

Tip #2: Be specific. Generalizations can be funny, but specificity is better. For example, a story about squirrels would be funnier if it were about nine beady-eyed squirrels that stuck to the side of my deck in formation, reminding me of the time my little brother glued his G.I. Joe's to the kitchen wall and declared war against all things legume.

Tip #3: Use comedic timing. This can be as simple as applying the funny word, phrase or sentence at the last possible moment. You can force a pause before the punch line by starting a new paragraph. If you're telling a story, you can use this technique to apply the element of surprise, taking the reader in an entirely unexpected (and funny) direction. This method works 100% of the time.

Unless it doesn't.

Tip #4: Use a thesaurus. A single word can be really, really funny. It may be the way they sound or even how they're spelled that gets the laugh. You'll know immediately when you see one, which is why your thesaurus is essential. For example, destroy is routine but pulverize is hilarious. Yellow is conventional but chartreuse is witty. Surprise is ordinary but flabbergasted is priceless.

Tip #5: Use a swipe file. This is one of the best tools for anyone who writes. A swipe file is a collection of really good stuff that you didn't think of first—you swiped it from someone else. Despite the name, there is no plagiaristic aspect to a swipe file. These tidbits are purely for inspiration. I keep my file electronically, and two of my favorite items are transitory phrases: 'Not to be outdone' and 'In a related development'. These are quite useful in introducing a comic turn of events. Feel free to swipe them. I did.

Tip #6: Edit the crap out of it. (Notice how double entendres aren't really that funny.) The truth is that being funny is incredibly hard work for most of us. Your first draft has some good stuff in it. Use the rules above to make it better. Then do it again. Then read it out loud to someone who doesn't speak your language. This avoids humiliation while allowing you to hear, and correct, the cadence of your writing. When you think you're done, ask a friend to read it, silently, in your presence. Focus your attention on the outer corner of their eyes while trying to appear indifferent.

When you see the crinkle, start breathing again. When you see the grin, let out a sigh of relief. When the grin turns into giggle, you'll find that you are giggling, too. When the giggle turns into a guffaw, send the piece to your editor with the serenity that can only come from contributing to the good health and soda-stained keyboards of your readers.

SHORT STORY WRITING TIPS

How do you write a short story? How is writing a short story different than writing a novel?

These are tough questions to answer because there are as many types of short stories as there are types of novels. There are long short stories, short short stories, simple short stories, and complex short stories.

Still, if you want to write a short story, here are five steps to help you get started:

1. Read Short Stories

Real writers read, and as Stephen King said, "If you don't have time to read, you don't have time to write."

If you've never read a short story, you're going to have a difficult time writing one. Even if you've read hundreds of stories, studying one or two closely will help improve your understanding of the short story form.

2. Summarize Your Short Story

Before you begin writing, try a screenwriting trick known as loglines. A logline is a one sentence summary of your short story, its core, its essence. For example, here's a logline for "A Rose For Emily" by William Faulkner:

Logline: A lonely, Southern woman is found dead and decaying in her home after being abandoned by her lover.

The formula is *your character + a descriptor* (e.g. lonely, Southern woman) followed by *an event* (e.g. found dead) followed by *a conflict* (abandoned by her lover).

This will help you understand what your story is about.

3. Write Your Short Story

Some guides suggest focusing on writing a catchy first paragraph first, but while that's important, it puts a lot of pressure on you when you're first getting started writing your short story.

Instead, just write. Just put pen to paper. Don't worry about what comes out. It's not important. You just need to get your short story started.

You will need to write 50 to 100 percent more words than will end up in the final draft of your short story. That means if you're trying to write a 5,000 word short story, you might need to write 10,000 words total in your first draft. Why?

Your job is less to write words than to pick the best words. To get a good short story, you will have to cut out a lot of mediocre writing.

4. Rewrite and Edit

All good writing is rewriting.

After you write your first draft, you need to start cutting, rewriting, and editing your short story. This is the hardest part of writing a short story, and can feel like wading through a swamp or climbing through a very tight cave.

However, don't give up now. You're almost there.

To make rewriting easier, I highly recommend the word processing program, Scrivener, which makes organizing your work much easier.

5. Submit!

Before you submit your short story, make sure you've read it aloud several times to find typos and grammatical errors and that you've formatted it according to standard manuscript format.

Then, skim several literary magazines in your genre and read their submission guidelines to know if your short story will be a good fit.

Finally, it's time to send your baby out into the world. Don't over think it. Just do it. It will be hard to let go of your short story, but you can't get published if you don't submit.

Short Stories: 10 Tips for Creative Writers

Posted by Dennis G. Jerz, on March 30th, 2011 By Kathy Kennedy and Dennis G. Jerz

Writing short stories means beginning as close to the conclusion as possible, and grabbing the reader in the very first moments. Conserve characters and scenes, typically by focusing on just one conflict. Drive towards a sudden, unexpected revelation.

Contents

1. Get Started: Emergency Tips

Is your **short story assignment due tomorrow morning**? These emergency tips may help. Good luck!

- **What does your protagonist want?** (The athlete who wants her team to win the big game and the car crash victim who wants to survive are not unique or interesting enough.)
- When the story begins, what **morally significant actions** has your protagonist taken **towards that goal**? ("Morally significant" doesn't mean conventionally "good"; rather, your protagonist should already have made a conscious choice that drives the rest of the story.)
- What **unexpected consequences** — directly related to the protagonist's goal-oriented actions – **ramp up the emotional energy** of the story? (Will the unexpected consequences force your protagonist to make yet another choice, leading to still more consequences?)
- What **details** from the setting, dialog, and tone **help you tell the story**? (Things to cut: travel scenes, character A telling character B about something we just saw happening to character A, and phrases like "said happily" — it's much better to say "bubbled" or "smirked" or "chortled.")
- What **morally significant choice** does your protagonist make at the climax of the story? (Your reader should care about the protagonist's decision. Ideally, the reader shouldn't see it coming.

Drawing on real-life experiences, such as winning the big game, bouncing back after an illness or injury, or dealing with the death of a loved one, are attractive choices for students who are looking for a "personal essay" topic. But simply describing powerful emotional experiences (which is one kind of school assignment) is not the same thing as engaging your reader's emotions. An effective short story does not simply record or express the author's feelings, but generates feelings in the reader. (See "Show, Don't (Just) Tell.") For those of you who are looking for more **long-term writing strategies**, here are some additional ideas.

- **Keep a notebook.** To R. V. Cassill, notebooks are "incubators," a place to begin with overheard conversation, expressive phrases, images, ideas, and interpretations on the world around you.
- **Write on a regular, daily basis.** Sit down and compose sentences for a couple of hours every day — even if you don't feel like it.
- **Collect stories from everyone you meet.** Keep the amazing, the unusual, the strange, the irrational stories you hear and use them for your own purposes. Study them for the underlying meaning and apply them to your understanding of the human condition.

Read, Read, Read

"Read a LOT of Chekhov. Then re-read it. Read Raymond Carver, Earnest Hemingway, Alice Munro, and Tobias Wolff. If you don't have time to read all of these authors, stick to Chekhov. He will teach you more than any writing teacher or workshop ever could." -Allyson Goldin, UWEC Asst. Professor of Creative Writing

2. Write a Catchy First Paragraph

In today's fast-moving world, the first sentence of your short story should catch your reader's attention with the **unusual,** the **unexpected,** an **action,** or a conflict. Begin with tension and immediacy. Remember that short stories need to start close to their end.

✗	I heard my neighbor through the wall.
	Dry and uninteresting.
✓	The neighbor behind us practiced scream therapy in his shower almost every day.
	The second sentence catches the reader's attention. Who is this guy who goes in his shower every day and screams? Why does he do that? What, exactly, is"scream therapy"? Let's keep reading…
✓	The first time I heard him, I stood in the bathroom listening at our shared wall for ten minutes, debating the wisdom of calling the police. It was very different from living in the duplex over middle-aged Mr. and Mrs. Brow and their two young sons in Duluth.

The rest of the paragraph introduces I and an internal conflict as the protagonist debates a course of action and introduces an intriguing contrast of past and present setting.

"It is important to understand the basic elements of fiction writing before you consider how to put everything together. This process is comparable to producing something delectable in the kitchen–any ingredient that you put into your bowl of dough impacts your finished loaf of bread. To create a perfect loaf, you must balance ingredients baked for the correct amount of time and enhanced with the right polishing glaze." -Laurel Yourke

3. Developing Characters

Your job, as a writer of short fiction–whatever your beliefs–is to put complex personalities on stage and let them strut and fret their brief hour. Perhaps the sound and fury they make will signify something that has more than passing value–that will, in Chekhov's words, "make [man] see what he is like." -Rick Demarnus

In order to develop a living, breathing, multi-faceted character, it is important to **know way more about the character than you will ever use in the story**. Here is a partial list of character details to help you get started.

- Name
- Age
- Job
- Ethnicity
- Appearance
- Residence
- Pets
- Religion
- Hobbies
- Single or married?
- Children?
- Temperament

- Favorite color
- Friends
- Favorite foods
- Drinking patterns
- Phobias
- Faults
- Something hated?
- Secrets?
- Strong memories?
- Any illnesses?
- Nervous gestures?
- Sleep patterns

Imagining all these details will help you get to know your character, but your reader probably won't need to know much more than the **most important things in four areas**:

- **Appearance.** Gives your reader a visual understanding of the character.
- **Action.** Show the reader what kind of person your character is, by describing actions rather than simply listing adjectives.
- **Speech.** Develop the character as a person — don't merely have your character announce important plot details.
- **Thought.** Bring the reader into your character's mind, to show them your character's unexpressed memories, fears, and hopes.

For example, let's say I want to develop a college student persona for a short story that I am writing. What do I know about her?

Her name is Jen, short for **Jennifer Mary Johnson**. She is **21 years old**. She is a fair-skinned **Norwegian** with **blue eyes**, long, curly **red hair**, and is **5 feet 6 inches tall**. Contrary to the stereotype about redheads, she is actually **easygoing and rather shy**. She loves **cats** and has two of them named Bailey and Allie. She is a **technical writing major** with a minor in biology. Jen **plays the piano** and is an **amateur photographer**. She lives in the **dorms** at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She **eats pizza** every day for lunch and loves Red Rose **tea**. She **cracks her knuckles** when she is nervous. Her mother just committed suicide.

4. Choose a Point of View

Point of view is the narration of the story from the perspective of **first, second,** or **third person**. As a writer, you need to determine who is going to tell the story and how much information is available for the narrator to reveal in the short story. The narrator can be directly involved in the action **subjectively,** or the narrator might only report the action **objectively.**

- **First Person.** The story is told from the view of **"I."** The narrator is either the **protagonist** (main character) and directly affected by unfolding events, or the narrator is a **secondary character** telling the story revolving around the protagonist. This is a good choice for beginning writers because it is the easiest to write.
- • I saw a tear roll down his cheek. I had never seen my father cry before. I looked away while he brushed
  • the offending cheek with his hand.
- **Second Person.** The story is told directly to **"you"**, with the reader as a participant in the action.
- • You laughed loudly at the antics of the clown. You clapped your hands with joy.
- **Third Person.** The story tells what **"he", "she,"** or **"it"** does. The third-person narrator's perspective can be **limited** (telling the story from one character's viewpoint) or **omniscient** (where the narrator knows everything about all of the characters).
- • He ran to the big yellow loader sitting on the other side of the gravel pit shack.
- Your narrator might take sides in the conflict you present, might be as transparent as possible, or might advocate a position that you want your reader to challenge (this is the "unreliable narrator" strategy).

Yourke on point of view:

- **First Person.** "Unites narrator and reader through a series of secrets" when they enter one character's perceptions. However, it can "lead to telling" and limits reader's connections to other characters in the short story."
- **Second Person.** "Puts readers within the actual scene so that readers confront possibilities directly." However, it is important to place your characters "in a tangible environment" so you don't "omit the details readers need for clarity." Rarely used in short stories and least effective.
- **Third Person Omniscient.** Allows you to explore all of the characters' thoughts and motivations. Transitions are extremely important as you move from character to character.
- **Third Person Limited.** "Offers the intimacy of one character's perceptions." However, the writer must "deal with character absence from particular scenes."

5. Write Meaningful Dialogue

Make your readers hear the pauses between the sentences. Let them see characters lean forward, fidget with their cuticles, avert their eyes, uncross their legs**.** -Jerome Stern

Dialogue is what your characters **say** to each other (or to themselves).

Each speaker gets his/her own paragraph, and the paragraph includes whatever you wish to say about what the character is doing when speaking. (See: "Quotation Marks: Using Them in Dialogue".)

"Where are you going?" John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor. "To the racetrack." Mary edged towar

the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head. "Not again," John stood up, flexing his fingers. "We are already maxe

out on our credit cards."

The above paragraph is confusing, because it is not clear when one speech stops and the other starts.

"Where are you going?" John asked nervously.

"To the racetrack," Mary said, trying to figure out whether John was too upset to let her get away with it this time.

"Not again," said John, wondering how they would make that month's rent. "We are already maxed out on our credit

The second example is mechanically correct, since it uses a separate paragraph to present each speaker's turn advanc

the conversation. But the narrative material between the direct quotes is mostly useless.

Write Meaningful Dialogue Labels

"John asked nervously" is an example of "telling." The author could write "John asked very nervously" or "John asked so nervously that his voice was shaking," and it still wouldn't make the story any more effective.

How can the author convey John's state of mind, without coming right out and telling the reader about it? By inference. That is, mention a detail that conjures up in the reader's mind the image of a nervous person.

✔ John sat up. "Wh– where are you going?"

✔ "Where are you going?" John stammered, staring at his Keds.

✔ Deep breath. Now or never. "Where are you going?"

✘ John sat up and took a deep breath, knowing that his confrontation with Mary had to come now, or it would never come at all. "Wh– where are you going?" he stammered nervously, staring at his Keds.

Beware — a little detail goes a long way. Why would your reader bother to think about what is going on, if the author carefully explains what each and every line means?

Let's return to the first example, and show how dialogue labels can affect the meaning of a passage.

✔ "Where are you going?" John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor.

"To the racetrack." Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head.

“Not again,” John stood up, flexing his fingers. “We are already maxed out on our credit cards.”

In the above revision, John nervously asks Mary where she is going, and Mary seems equally nervous about goi

But if you play a little with the paragraphing..

“Where are you going?”

John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor. “To the racetrack.”

Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John’s bent head. “Not again.”

John stood up, flexing his fingers. “We are already maxed out on our credit cards.”

All I changed was the paragraphing (and I changed a comma to a period.) Now Mary seems more aggressive — she seems to be moving to block John, who seems nervous and self-absorbed. And John seems to be bringing up the credit card problem as an excuse for his trip to the racing track. He and Mary seem to be desperate to for money now. I’d rather read the rest of the second story than the rest of the first one.

6. Use Setting and Context

Setting moves readers most when it contributes to an organic whole. So close your eyes and picture your characters within desert, jungle, or suburb–whichever setting shaped them. Imagining this helps balance location and characterization. Right from the start, view your characters inhabiting a distinct place. -- Laurel Yourke

Setting includes the **time, location, context,** and **atmosphere** where the plot takes place.

- Remember to **combine setting with characterization and plot**.
- **Include enough detail** to let your readers picture the scene but only details that actually add something to the story. (For example, do not describe Mary locking the front door, walking across the yard, opening the garage door, putting air in her bicycle tires, getting on her bicycle–none of these details matter except that she rode out of the driveway without looking down the street.)
- Use **two or more senses** in your descriptions of setting.
- Rather than feed your readers information about the weather, population statistics, or how far it is to the grocery store, **substitute descriptive details** so your reader can experience the location the way your characters do.
- Our sojourn in the desert was an educational contrast with its parched heat, dust storms, and cloudless blu sky filled with the blinding hot sun. The rare thunderstorm was a cause for celebration as the dry cement tunnels of the aqueducts filled rapidly with rushing water. Great rivers of sand flowed around and through the metropolitan inroads of man’s progress in the greater Phoenix area, forcefully moved aside for concret

and steel structures. Palm trees hovered over our heads and saguaro cactuses saluted us with their thorny arms.

7. Set Up the Plot

Plot is what happens, the storyline, the action. Jerome Stern says it is how you set up the situation, where the turning points of the story are, and what the characters do at the end of the story.

A plot is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance. -Jane Burroway

Understanding these story elements for developing actions and their end results will help you plot your next short story.

- **Explosion or "Hook."** A thrilling, gripping, stirring event or problem that grabs the reader's attention right away.
- **Conflict.** A character versus the internal self or an external something or someone.
- **Exposition.** Background information required for seeing the characters in context.
- **Complication.** One or more problems that keep a character from their intended goal.
- **Transition.** Image, symbol, dialogue that joins paragraphs and scenes together.
- **Flashback.** Remembering something that happened before the short story takes place.
- **Climax.** When the rising action of the story reaches the peak.
- **Falling Action.** Releasing the action of the story after the climax.
- **Resolution.** When the internal or external conflict is resolve.

Brainstorming. If you are having trouble deciding on a plot, try brainstorming. Suppose you have a protagonist whose husband comes home one day and says he doesn't love her any more and he is leaving. What are actions that can result from this situation?

1. She becomes a workaholic.
2. Their children are unhappy.
3. Their children want to live with their dad.
4. She moves to another city.
5. She gets a new job.
6. They sell the house.
7. She meets a psychiatrist and falls in love.
8. He comes back and she accepts him.
9. He comes back and she doesn't accept him.
10. She commits suicide.
11. He commits suicide.
12. She moves in with her parents.

The **next step** is to select one action from the list and brainstorm another list from that particular action.

8. Create Conflict and Tension

"Conflict is the fundamental element of fiction, fundamental because in literature only trouble is interesting. It takes trouble to turn the great themes of life into a story: birth, love, work, and death." - Janet Burroway

Conflict produces **tension** that makes the story begin. Tension is created by **opposition** between the character or characters and **internal** or **external** forces or conditions. By **balancing the opposing forces** of the conflict, you keep readers glued to the pages wondering how the story will end.

Possible Conflicts Include:

- The protagonist against another individual
- The protagonist against nature (or technology)
- The protagonist against society
- The protagonist against God
- The protagonist against himself or herself.

Yourke's Conflict Checklist

- **Mystery.** Explain just enough to tease readers. Never give everything away.
- **Empowerment.** Give both sides options.
- **Progression.** Keep intensifying the number and type of obstacles the protagonist faces.
- **Causality.** Hold fictional characters more accountable than real people. Characters who make mistakes frequently pay, and, at least in fiction, commendable folks often reap rewards.
- **Surprise.** Provide sufficient complexity to prevent readers predicting events too far in advance.
- **Empathy.** Encourage reader identification with characters and scenarios that pleasantly or (unpleasantly) resonate with their own sweet dreams (or night sweats).
- **Insight.** Reveal something about human nature.
- **Universality.** Present a struggle that most readers find meaningful, even if the details of that struggle reflect a unique place and time.
- **High Stakes.** Convince readers that the outcome matters because someone they care about could lose something precious. Trivial clashes often produce trivial fiction.

9. Build to a Crisis or Climax

This is the **turning point of the story**–the most exciting or dramatic moment.

The crisis may be a recognition, a decision, or a resolution. The character understands what hasn't been seen before, or realizes what must be done, or finally decides to do it. It's when the worm turns. Timing is crucial. If the crisis occurs too early, readers will expect still another turning point. If it occurs too late, readers will get impatient–the character will seem rather thick.-Jerome Stern

Jane Burroway says that the crisis "must always be presented as a scene. It is "the moment" the reader has been waiting for. In Cinderella's case, "the payoff is when the slipper fits."

While a good story needs a crisis, a random event such as a car crash or a sudden illness is simply an emergency –unless it somehow involves a **conflict** that makes the reader care about the characters

10. Find a Resolution

The **solution to the conflict**. In short fiction, it is difficult to provide a complete resolution and you often need to just show that characters are beginning to change in some way or starting to see things differently.

Yourke examines some of the options for ending a story.

Open. Readers determine the meaning. Brendan's eyes looked away from the priest and up to the mountains.

Resolved. Clear-cut outcome. While John watched in despair, Helen loaded up the car with her belongings and drove away.

Parallel to Beginning. Similar to beginning situation or image. They were driving their 1964 Chevrolet Impala down the highway while the wind blew through their hair. Her father drove up in a new 1964 Chevrolet Impala, a replacement for the one that burned up.

Monologue. Character comments. I wish Tom could have known Sister Dalbec's prickly guidance before the dust devils of Sin City battered his soul.

Dialogue. Characters converse.

Literal Image. Setting or aspect of setting resolves the plot. The aqueducts were empty now and the sun was shining once more.

Symbolic Image. Details represent a meaning beyond the literal one. Looking up at the sky, I saw a cloud cross the shimmering blue sky above us as we stood in the morning heat of Sin City.

VARIETY IN SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Taken from THE LIVELY ART OF WRITING by Lucile Vaughan Payne

Types: Loose Sentence, Periodic Sentence, Combination Sentence, Expanding subject, verb, and object, Exercises

Two sentence patterns are of major importance:

The Loose Sentence
The Periodic Sentence

Every sentence in the English language will fit into one of these categories or will be a combination of both. Once you understand the two patterns, you can write any kind of sentence you like without the slightest fear of going astray.

You can master these patterns easily if you first get a grip on one important principle: The principle of the basic statement (main idea).

The following are basic statements:

1. Bells rang.

2. Love is blind.

3. The cat scratched Sally.

4. John gave his mother flowers.

5. The teacher considered him a good student.

Every English sentence contains a basic statement. It may stand alone as one short sentence as in the examples above, or it may be buried inside a longer sentence. It is the kernel that you have left after you chop away everything in a sentence except its essential meaning; it is the kernel you build on when you want to make a sentence longer.

THE LOOSE SENTENCE: This sentence is a basic statement with a string of details added to it.

Basic statement: *Bells rang.*

Loose sentence: *Bells rang, filling the air with their clangor, startling pigeons into flight from every belfry, bringing people into the streets to hear the news.*

Basic statement: *The teacher considered him a good student.*

Loose sentence: *The teacher considered him a good student, steady if not inspired, willing if not eager, responsive to instruction and conscientious about his work.*

THE PERIODIC SENTENCE: In this sentence, additional details are placed before the basic statement. Delay, of course, is the secret weapon of the periodic sentence.

Basic statement: *John gave his mother flowers.*

Periodic sentence: *John, the tough one, the sullen kid who scoffed at any show of sentiment, gave his mother flowers.*

Basic statement: *The cat scratched Sally.*

Periodic sentence: *Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the lovable cat scratched Sally.*

THE PERIODIC (INTERRUPTIVE): In this sentence, additional details are added inside the basic statement:

Basic statement: *Love is blind.*

Periodic sentence: *Love, as everyone knows except those who happen to be afflicted with it, is blind.*

THE COMBINATION: In this sentence, additional details are added before and after the basic statement.

Once you have learned to recognize and use the two major sentence patterns, you can forget about adhering to them strictly. You can combine elements of both if you wish.

Suppose you are working with a short, simple sentence--A sentence reduced to the barest basic statement: John was angry.

This short sentence may sound exactly right inside your paragraph--just short enough and sharp enough to have the force you want. In that case, leave it alone. But perhaps that nagging inner ear tells you that it isn't quite right; it needs something.

Thus, you make it a shade more periodic: *John was suddenly, violently angry.*

Or you make it even more periodic: *John, usually the calmest of men, was suddenly, violently angry.*

Or you decide to add detail at the end: *John, usually the calmest of men, was suddenly, violently angry, so angry that he lost control completely.*

Now the sentence is both periodic and loose. You could shake it up still more by moving some of the detail up front: *Usually the calmest of men, John was suddenly, violently angry, so angry that he lost control completely.*

EXPANDING THE SUBJECT, VERB, AND OBJECT

Periodic structures usually expand the subject or verb. Loose structures expand the verb or object.

Expanding the Subject: The easiest way to start the details flowing is to think of the subject as being followed by a pause. Make yourself hear that pause. It is exactly the same kind of pause that occurs in your own conversation every day, in sentences like the following. Notice these sentences are periodic (interruptive) and they expand the subjects.

That boy, the one wearing glasses, is in my history class.
This piecrust, tough as it is, tastes pretty good.
The class (pause) read the assignment.
The class, a mixture of juniors and seniors in advanced math, read the assignment.
The class, usually noisy and inattentive, read the assignment.
The class, with a subdued rustle of books and papers, read the assignment.

When expanding the subject, consider these methods of expansion: description, appositive, adjective, prepositional phrase, participles, etc.

Expanding the Verb: Expand the verb by showing how its action progresses. Any phrase that tells how or when a verb acts is related grammatically to the verb.

The class read, listlessly at first, and then with growing interest, the assignment.
The class read, after trying unsuccessfully to divert the instructor, the assignment.

Expanding the Object (or the rest of the sentence):

The class read the assignment, a full chapter.
I saw Mr. Hassenfeffer, the instructor.
The class read the assignment, a full chapter, with a dismaying number of difficult-looking statistical tables.
I saw Mr. Hassenfeffer, the instructor, flat-nosed, beady-eyes, on guard every minute.

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1. Write a loose (cumulative) sentence at least twenty words long using each of the basic statements. Do not change the basic statement; just add to it.

The moon rose.
The man was dead.
She liked the song.
They had a good time.

2. Using the following basic statements, write four periodic sentences at least fifteen words long:

Mary left the room.
Hate is based on fear.
The man was dead.
The circus was his life.

3. Expand the subject on the sentence below:

The old man shuffled out of sight.

4. Expand the verb of each of the following sentences.

The girl walked across the playground.
The boy talked about fishing.

5. Add a simple appositive to the noun at the end of each sentence below:

He liked the car.
John read the book.
They listened to the lecture.
He called the dog.

6. Using prepositional phrases and participles, add detail to each of the appositives in the four sentences you have just written. Make each
sentence at least fifteen words long.