

Three Great Tips for Writing Your Story

This was originally done as a teleclass for the Adult Burn Community.

The three great tips for your writing I'm going to give you are in response to writing errors I've seen over and over in student writers' writing. I have read so many hundred stories at this point that these are my proactive suggestions of how to get it right first. Whether you've written your story already and want to rewrite it or you're just thinking about how you might go about it, these are some ideas you will want to consider.

Right at the beginning, I want to say that writing is something most of us have to do over and over to get it right. That's okay. We none of us would expect to go out and be say, a badminton champ just for walking in off the street. You'd expect to practice to get any good. The same with piano playing or baking cookies.

Writing is more fun than any of these as far as I'm concerned. And it gets more and more satisfying for the writer as we learn how to communicate effectively with our readers.

One

Recognize the difference between exposition and scene and choosing scenes for the majority of your story.

Has anyone had the experience of having a friend tell you that you absolutely have to see a certain movie or read a particular book? Yes. Does it make you want to see it? Usually the long drawn out plot synopsis makes me decide that I will NEVER see that movie or read that book. My husband is particularly attracted to long blurbs about what he's read or seen when I've been away. He will describe a movie, "Well, there's this town in Nova Scotia, see? And there's a girl there. And she wants to move to New York. . . ." He managed to put me off the movie *The New Waterford Girl* for years this way. It's a Canadian movie and actually very fine.

Why? Why does this loss of meaning happen when we actually are enthusiastic about something and want to share it with our friends?

It's because we're condensing the experience of the book or movie down into a plot summary. If it's our friends who are buttonholing us and telling us we have to read

this book, we haven't had the long time to sit down with the characters they've had. We want to hear the characters talking, see them pulled in different directions. We need as clearly as possible to insert ourselves into the life of the characters. As readers, we want to see what that character sees, hear what that person hears, smell the overpowering waft of fried fish as you walk in the door of that character's house.

This condensation of meaning is known as exposition. In order to understand what exposition is, we'll first look at its opposite, scene. Scene is what you want to use most of the time in your story. Here's an example. Key info here for you as a reader is that the King has been away at war for quite a while and has only recently returned home.

This excerpt is from a novel by Rose Tremain, called *Music and Silence*. Tremain won the Whitbread Novel Award for this book. You'll notice the old-fashioned language; the book is an historical novel. It's a wonderful piece of work.

Version 1 (scene)

“[King] Christian has a longing to be out in the air and orders the doctor to walk with him in the park, where the day has continued fine and his favourite roses are still in bloom.

Doctor Sperling's expression is grim and yet at the same time his face seems to be struggling with a secret smile as he says: “Sir, unhappy as I am to trouble you with this matter, it has preyed to insistently on my mind that I cannot put it from me and so feel at last that I must speak to you. . . .”

“Then speak to me, Doctor.”

“It is a matter which concerns your wife. . . .”

“If it concerns Kirsten,” says the King, “then assuredly I must hear it.”

They walk on. The scent of the roses reminds Christian of his mother, who, when she was young, liked to have a bowl of roses in her bedchamber.

The doctor's steps begins to slow and falter, and he master his smile, to make it fade, as he says: “Sir, I must reveal to you that when I visited Lady Kirsten. . . . although she would not submit to any examination. . . .”

“Yes?”

“Well, Your Majesty. . . because she fell prone on the floor and was wearing but her thin night garment, I was able to make. . .”

“Make what?”

“Make some anatomical observations, and I could clearly see. . . or so it appears to me. . .that the child shows itself already. And this I know, that no child in the womb makes itself plain in quite this way until approximately three months have passed, and thus I conclude. . .”

The King says nothing at all, only paces onwards with his long stride, so that Sperling now has to perform a little skittering run to keep up with him.

They have left the rose garden behind and are walking under an avenue of limes, in their wide shade, where the air is cool. The King does not look at Doctor Sperling but at the lime trees, seeming to examine them for signs of death or weakness. When they reach the end of the avenue he turns to the Doctor and says: “Thank you very much, Doctor Sperling.”

The doctor opens his mouth to qualify in greater detail what he has noted about Kirsten’s pregnancy, but the King holds up a hand to cut him off. “Thank you for your observations,” he says again.

Sperling looks confused (almost disappointed, as though deprived of the chance to recite some poem he had learned by heart) but he has no choice but to bow and retreat.

Christian waits until he is out of sight and then sits down on a stone bench that rests between two carved lions. He caresses his elflock. He looks back across the park to his beloved palace, his little Rosenborg, built for Kirsten, build in celebration of his love for her, and tears come to his eyes. He dos not need to ask who Kirsten’s lover is. He knows. He saw her dancing with Count Otto Ludwig at Werden, during the time of the wars. He saw the rapture on her face and that was all he needed to see. He weeps silently at first, then feels his whole body give way to a terrible howling, such as he seems to have heard inside himself for days and months, and which at last comes out.

Version Two—this is how you or I might condense that scene and tell to a friend. This is exposition.

King Christian and his doctor go for a walk in the rose garden. On the way, the doctor tells the king that although the king's wife wouldn't submit to a medical examination, he could tell from looking at her in her thin nightie that she was way further along in her pregnancy than the king thought.

The King realizes that since his wife's pregnancy is much more advanced than she's been saying, he can't possibly be the father of her child. He is devastated. He knows exactly who the father is: he's seen his wife dancing with the man.

The King sends the doctor away, sits down and starts to cry.

How much emotional impact does that have on you? If you're like most readers, the answer is zip. Nothing. The essence of the information is there, the plot summary—but as a reader, a listener, you have formed no relationship with the characters so you couldn't care less.

With your own story, you want people to care passionately about what happens. Understanding the difference between scene and exposition, and knowing when to use each, will help a great deal in that respect.

Let's go back to the original piece. I'm going to read it again but this time I'll show you what the writer has done there to make her readers care about what's happening. This is technique. It can be learned, just as we learn how to drive, to use a computer, to master the skills that we need for our work or in our parenting.

[King] Christian has a longing to be out in the air and orders the doctor to walk with him in the park, where the day has continued fine and his favourite roses are still in bloom. Here the writer is setting the scene. We're outside, with one man in command and the other being commanded. We are guessing, since the writer says the day has "continued" fine and there's talk about the roses still being in bloom, that this is fall, September or October. It's a subtle detail but it enables the reader to, however subconsciously, to feel a slight crispness to the air, that melancholy which autumn often brings, especially in a northern country like Denmark. How do we know we're in Denmark? The King's name.

Doctor Sperling's expression is grim and yet at the same time his face seems to be struggling with a secret smile as he says: "Sir, unhappy as I am to trouble you with this matter, it has preyed too insistently on my mind that I cannot put it from me and so feel at last that I must speak to you. . . ." The writer gives us a contradiction with the

character: he looks one way and yet is giving off the feeling of being pleased to be the bearer of what sounds like it's going to be bad news. This instantly piques our interest. It raises a dramatic question: what's really going on here? From the dialogue scrap, as a reader you are instantly aware that this is not contemporary speech. It's a little too courteous and mannered. It fits right in with the rose garden and the king.

“Then speak to me, Doctor.”

“It is a matter which concerns your wife. . .” Here the writer heightens the tension the first dramatic question has raised. Whatever's going on, it's to do with the king's wife and it's not good.

“If it concerns Kirsten,” says the King, “then assuredly I must hear it.” You can pretty well hear the music here switch to foreboding, *dub dub dub*.

They walk on. The scent of the roses reminds Christian of his mother, who, when she was young, liked to have a bowl of roses in her bedchamber. Here the writer inserts us further into the scene by way of sensory detail, the smell of roses. Since the fragrance reminds the king of his mother, it develops him further as a character: the man has a past, of which we're given the merest glimpse. It serves, however, to make him more real.

The doctor's steps begin to slow and falter, and he mastered his smile, to make it fade, as he says: “Sir, I must reveal to you that when I visited Lady Kirsten. . .although she would not submit to any examination. . .” Do we like this doctor character? He sounds like a piece of slime from this, wouldn't you say? Being the bearer of bad news is one thing, but to have to fight to wipe the smile off your face as you tell it is quite another. Notice how the doctor is doing his best to present himself as concerned and decent, and how the writer allows his body language to undercut this. As readers, we get this clearly. We feel like we're in the know.

“Yes?”

“Well, Your Majesty. . . because she fell prone on the floor and was wearing but her thin night garment, I was able to make. . .” The dramatic question continues.

“Make what?” Notice how the writer re-uses the word *make* to link the sentences.

“Make some anatomical observations, and I could clearly see. . . or so it appears to me. . .that the child shows itself already. And this I know, that no child in the womb makes itself plain in quite this way until approximately three months have passed, and thus I conclude. . .” Okay, now we're getting past the doctor's mealy-mouthing to the meat of it: the baby is way further along than our king dude thought.

The King says nothing at all, only paces onwards with his long stride, so that Sperling now has to perform a little skittering run to keep up with him. Here the writer again uses body language. As readers, we understand that the wretched doctor may have done his damage, but the King is still demonstrating who's actually in charge here but keeping on walking and making the doctor run and catch up. What the King has done here is keep his dignity as well.

They have left the rose garden behind and are walking under an avenue of limes, in their wide shade, where the air is cool. The King does not look at Doctor Sperling but at the lime trees, seeming to examine them for signs of death or weakness. When they reach the end of the avenue he turns to the Doctor and says: "Thank you very much, Doctor Sperling." The writer changes the geography of the scene slightly. We move from the rose garden to an avenue of lime trees. It's expansive but note the temperature is cool. This is again sensory detail and appropriate for the devastating news the King has just heard. The King, who does not show weakness himself, busies himself looking at the trees for signs of weakness. His one sentence to the doctor is extremely courteous.

The doctor opens his mouth to qualify in greater detail what he has noted about Kirsten's pregnancy, but the King holds up a hand to cut him off. "Thank you for your observations," he says again. These two sentences with their attendant actions further develop both the characters for us.

Sperling looks confused (almost disappointed, as though deprived of the chance to recite some poem he had learned by heart) but he has no choice but to bow and retreat. This is a visual for the reader. It's in keeping with what we've already learned about this doctor.

Christian waits until he is out of sight and then sits down on a stone bench that rests between two carved lions. This is a clear visual for the reader. It also further develops the character by showing us what he's doing. He's had a nasty shock and finally the guy gets to sit down but he won't do it in front of the doctor and show weakness. He caresses his elflock. He looks back across the park to his beloved palace, his little Rosenberg, built for Kirsten, built in celebration of his love for her, and tears come to his eyes. As readers, we understand that that any guy who's going to build a palace for his wife has deep feelings for her. He does not need to ask who Kirsten's lover is. He knows. He saw her dancing with Count Otto Ludwig at Werden, during the time of the wars. We have a name for the baby's father and a likely time of conception. He saw the rapture on her face and that was all he needed to see. He weeps silently at first, then feels his whole body give way to a terrible howling, such as he seems to have heard inside himself for days and months, and which at last comes out. This is

an example, which we're all familiar with, of knowing something and not wanting to know it. We hope against hope that it isn't true. Now this pretence has been stripped from the king. He has to face his deepest, most horrible fear. Not only has his wife been untrue but she's pregnant as a result of this. She has lied to him. And, because he is king of Denmark (the Rosenborg palace confirmed it for us), he's going to have to actually take some measures about his unfaithful wife and bastard child that an ordinary man might not have to take. This raises another dramatic question for the reader: now what happens? We want to find out. In point of fact, the novel actually takes place in Jutland, which is what Denmark was called a few centuries ago.

So when is it appropriate for a writer to use exposition? When you want to get through information quickly. For example, "It had been five years since Elise had seen her father." Or: "By eight o'clock in the evening, the boat was still no closer to the anchorage they'd been heading for all day. The storm, far from decreasing as they'd been hoping, had become so severe, Alan decided it was time to get into their survival suits." Exposition enables you to set the stage for the reader and then get to the meat of your story, as in, "By autumn Kayla had decided it was time to give Brent the boot."

Do not, under any circumstances, start off a story with your character's alarm going off in the morning. Spare us! We don't want each waking up detail. It's boring. One of the commandments of writing is *Thou shalt not bore your reader*.

Think of exposition and scene as different coloured building blocks. You need both kinds of blocks for your story. Most of the story will be built from scene building blocks. Use exposition blocks as bridges between scenes. In a piece of short prose, you might expect to have two to three scenes with blocks of exposition between them to make nice smooth time or season or location bridges for your reader. I often advise students to print off a hard copy of their story and go through it with highlighters, using different colours for scene and for exposition. It will make things visually very clear as to your balance. If you're in doubt about what's what, ask yourself, is this here and now? Then it's scene. Are there smells and conversation and the sound of creaking floors? Scene again. With a sentence like, "Ebenezer had had a hard life," is this scene?

Two

How do you get your reader to turn pages? You plant dramatic questions for the reader, leaving an appropriate amount of time to let the questions hang before you answer them.

As human beings, sometimes we can be a little apologetic about taking up too much of someone's time. We may try to make a story go too fast. Think of the good storytellers you've known in your lifetime. They could take their time. You and I were quite happy to sit back in our seats and listen. Why? Because we were interested. We wanted to know, *and then what happened?* This is what we are trying for in our own stories. Put in the smell of car exhaust, the *chunk chunk* of someone digging in hard ground with a shovel, the feel of scraping snow from a car's windshield and how cold your hands get when you've forgotten your gloves.

Give yourself permission to take the time your story needs. But understand that your reader needs certain treats along the way to keep following. One of these treats—if any of you has a dog and has trained that dog you'll know what I mean—is the writer posing questions in the story and then not rushing to answer them.

Knock knock. Who's that at the door? First dramatic question.

Your character goes to the door. She's an older lady with white hair. Does she open the door without looking through the peephole or even asking who's there? Ooo, bad move. She's opening it without looking and it's not a child selling chocolates which she would buy or her next door neighbour in the townhouse complex. The minute she lays eyes on the man outside, she knows she's made a big mistake. Describe the man in a sentence as we're really interested in what's going to happen and you don't want to slow the pace of the story down to a crawl though we will be happy to see what your character sees. So your first dramatic question is paid off, but now a second one, what's she going to do? comes up. Your character is thinking, *Oh no*, she's thinking about all the headlines lately about home invasions, and this is the city and how is she going to get out of this?

Woof woof. What's this? You haven't paid off the what's she's going to do question, but here comes another question about a dog. Who is this dog and what's it doing?

The dog charges to the door where the man has edged his way in. *Arrg*, the dog goes, all teeth showing. You put in that this dog is an English short-haired pointer. The older lady is looking at her dog in astonishment: she's never heard her cuddly animal do this before. *Arrg*. The lady takes hold of the dog's collar. The dog is trying to stand on its hind legs at this point and sounding like a Rottweiler. It's about the size of a

Dalmation. The family know it as good-natured, always looking for a pat, a couch potato. The breed is known as sporting. It's a bird dog, the kind of creature which points to game, one paw up in the air, tail quivering.

The dog shoulders its way between the older lady and the man.

The man looks at the dog, the teeth, and behind the animal, the woman. "Uh, wrong address," the man says.

Arrg goes the dog and the white-haired lady nods now, giving the dog a bit of slack on its collar so it lunges forward. The man retreats so she can shut the door, and shut it she does and lock it and lean against it, trembling. "Good dog," the woman says and gets the dog a treat. Then another treat for good measure.

Later, that evening, the white-haired woman phones her daughter and tells her about what happened. "Did you call the police?" the daughter says.

"I never thought of it," the woman says.

"Jeez, mom."

The next time the family gets together for dinner, the woman's children buy the dog a steak and cook the steak for the dog. They know perfectly well that dog has saved their mother's life.

And what did the bad guy look like? What was there about him which made the older lady know instantly she'd made a big mistake? I never found out. The woman was my mom and she could never tell me what combination of specific concrete detail brought home to her the enormity of her mistake. As a writer, I will chew on that and wonder about it and make up details at some point.

I love true stories. Fiction can teach us a lot, though.

Does anyone here read mysteries? Sue Grafton? At one point I was told by someone I respected to read Sue Grafton and notice, really notice what she was doing in terms of sustaining reader interest. I actually went through a whole book and wrote down each bit of technique I noted, as in here's an image, a metaphor attached to a character description, dialogue. The most significant thing that I saw this writer doing and I learned a great deal from it, was that about every two pages and a half pages she posed a new dramatic question. When one dramatic question was paid off—that is, answered—up popped another question for the reader.

A skilled writer is going to do this planting of questions automatically. But when we're learning, it's an excellent practice to go through and highlight each place in your story you plant a question. This is called a setup. By the end of your story, each question must have been answered. In technical jargon, this is called a payoff. Each setup must be paid off. It also works the other way round. Each payoff must have a setup. Let's say you're going to write a story where the payoff is the protagonist is a twelve-year-old girl who takes a shortcut through a wooded area on the way home from school and is jumped by a guy hiding behind a tree. The girl whirls, kicks her assailant and gets away (this is a true story by the way, happened to a friend's daughter) you had better set up somewhere close to the beginning of your story that this kid has been taking karate lessons for two years. Then your reader is satisfied. We not only get the up ending where the kid turns the table on the bad guy and isn't hurt herself, but we understand why it is she's been able to do this. The payoff has been properly setup.

Here's an example of planting dramatic questions from a book called *Dough* by Mort Zacher. It's nonfiction, American, and won a nice prize a couple of years back. It's the writer's first book.

“My dad looked up at me. “Do you want me to go with you? After all, I am still a lawyer.”

“No thanks, Dad, I want to handle this one on my own.”

I walked down the hall and entered the office of the small-estate section of the Kings Country Surrogate's Court. I closed the door behind me. The line leading to the gray metal counter manned by a young clerk was short; only two people were ahead of me. I waited patiently. Another few minutes would make no difference. I had been waiting for this for a long time, even before I knew there was anything to wait for. Until only a few months ago, I had still dreamed of winning the lottery. But you have to be in it to win it, and I was never in it. Once upon a time, as a CPA at Deloitte, I had a client who won the New York State lottery, but that's her story, not mine.

Now it was my turn. “Hi,” I said as I nodded and handed the clerk one original and one duplicate set of the required papers for the estate of Harry Wolk. The clerk took the papers and read them in front of me. I watched his eyes move down the pages, making sure all the required information had been supplied: original death certificate, a signed will with affidavit of attesting witnesses, properly executed trust document, and the court's preprinted informational forms fully completed. Then he got to the disclaimer.

He stopped. His eyes narrowed. One end of his mouth curled up.”

As readers, we’re initially asking ourselves, why does the dad offer to go with this character? Then it switches to why and what does the character need to do on his own? Then why is he waiting patiently? What exactly is it that it’s his turn for? Note how precise the writer is. We understand the geographic location and where the character is in relation to inside and outside. We see the gray metal counter, the short lineup. We feel the writer’s vast patience even though we don’t understand it. The bit about him being a CPA, a chartered public accountant, makes him sound like a respectable bloke. But he’s speaking about that as being in the past—why?

In the last para of the bit I read of *Dough* the writer is precise in his list of what he’s handed in to the clerk. We understand now this is something to do with an estate. The deceased is named. There isn’t so much info that it bores his readers, but we understand this guy knows what he’s talking about. The excerpt ends up the reader going okay, why is the clerk surprised? What’s he encountered there?

So when you write your story, remember dramatic questions. It just plain delights us as readers to dangle from that hook of not knowing and wanting to know. Pacing will be something you’ll have to figure out yourself. How much information do you dole out? When do you pay off the questions? In part, this will depend on how long your story is. Is it a book? Then it will likely be a little longer between dramatic questions than in a short piece of nonfiction.

Now you’ve been alerted to the presence of dramatic questions, look for them in whatever you’re reading. If you’re looking for a book to use as a model for your own work, pick a genre which is the same as what you’re writing in, and a *contemporary* author you admire. I say contemporary because styles in writing change all the time. What worked really well in writing twenty years ago is not going to go over well now. As readers, TV has changed our attention span. Movies and rock videos have made us much edgier readers than we used to be. We want much more snap and movement than a reader from previous generations would have been used to. So if you’re going to check out a book to see how a writer you like handles the timing of dramatic questions, pick one which was just published this year or last year. Order it in from the library if you don’t want to buy it. Libraries are a huge resource. You could also consider asking a librarian what book has just come in the genre you’re interested in that she or he thinks is terrific. Read reviews. Remember all you’re doing is looking at actual technique. You’re not stealing the writer’s content, all you’re doing is seeing

how that writer has used technique to stimulate a reader's interest and keep them turning pages.

Three

The third tip that I will give you to write a great story is to treat the characters in your piece as though they are strangers making sure to include info that we, the reader need to know.

What do I mean by this? Well, you know your uncle Dan. You know he has red hair. You know that he drinks too much beer though the family won't admit this. You know that in fact Dan is likely an alcoholic, but hey, he's a good guy, right, and he he's fun, he plays the guitar really well and if he's moody maybe that has something to do with PST. Do not, under any circumstances, get him started on Kandahar, or the spiders they have over there the size of plates, or is it crabs but change the conversation if you can. If you hear the phrase, "In Kandahar. . ." one more time you'll scream.

You know how your uncle Dan smells, what the combination of shampoo and yeasty beer smell and maybe a bit of used engine oil from when he's messing around with that motorcycle he's been rebuilding for the last two years.

You know that your uncle Dan has been separated from his wife, your aunt Kate, for a couple of years and there's something floating around, some secret the rest of the family is holding back that you haven't yet figured out. There's worry in there. You don't want to know more. It's painful, it's likely ugly, it's just too much family, right? Easier to talk about the hockey game.

You know how it feels when uncle Dan gives you a smack on the shoulder good night, good bye, you're too old now for hugs, guys don't hug, anyway but if you were to hug you know exactly how your uncle feels, he's hard, he's got big shoulders, he spends a lot of time in the gym, actually. For a short guy, he's actually pretty tough.

So let's say that in your story, you bring in your uncle Dan. You see this man so clearly, you know how he speaks, "yeah, right," he says a lot of the time, you have all this history to bear and such clear images that you plain up and forget that we, your readers, need to be introduced to good ole uncle Dan. We don't see all that stuff you have in your head. All we can see is what you put on the paper. You say uncle Dan is old. Hmm. Old is a relative term. Old means that he's older than you, but maybe you

are twenty-one and uncle Dan is in his late thirties so that isn't old as far as I'm concerned. Don't use an imprecise term like old or young. Hey, my husband's aunt May who is ninety-five, calls one of her sixty-year-old nephews young! It depends on where you're standing. As far as my twenty-year-old students are concerned, fifty is like, *ancient*. Just give the age and let the reader make her or his own judgment.

All your reader can see, hear, feel, understand, is what the writer puts on the paper. If I'm in a hurry with some piece on writing on a deadline, I'll ask a writing buddy to look over a piece for me and check that everything I think is in there has in fact made it to paper. Leaving your story alone for a day, a week, a month or six months and then coming back to it will enable you to see what you've in fact left out.

The story which you are committing to paper is, in essence, all about *character* whether it's yours, mine or uncle Dan's. If I tell you a story about a tree in my garden, unless you're another gardener, it's likely your eyes are going to glaze pretty fast. Trees don't have crises. They don't have decisions to make. We're not going to turn pages wanting to know what tough choices this greathearted tree is going to make.

As humans, as readers, we want to know about characters. This is especially true with nonfiction as, in a sense, we're checking to see how others have handled dilemmas in their lives. When someone says to us, *this is a true story*, it gives us a different feel in the gut. We're like, *really?* And that ancient pattern of sitting around a cave kicks in, it's a long winter night, and we, your readers, say, *Tell me a story*.

Tell me a true story of what happened to you and how you survived it. For you did survive it, or you wouldn't be here. And it wasn't easy, getting here, was it? How did you do it? Tell me because I too have tough things to deal with. They're not the same as yours, but maybe I can learn something about what it means to be human by reading your story. Maybe reading about your life will help me make a decision about something I'm facing in my life. Maybe there's something about grace I can learn.

So, along with uncle Dan, you need to treat *yourself* as a character in your story. Rather than telling us something like, "I was always a sensitive child," show us by your actions that it was so. Show us a child who picks up worms from a concrete path and puts them back on the lawn so they won't get run over by tricycles or tropped on by feet. This is the famous *show don't tell* dictum that creative writing texts always talk about.

Actions show character. Is your aunt Kate one of those people who knew in Grade 12 what the name of her three children was going to be? If so, how's the breakup with

your uncle Dan affecting her? What do her actions show? Is she volunteering for Habitat for Humanity? Does she have a new boyfriend? Maybe she's on the executive of the union where she works and is spending all her available free time going to meetings. Has she got herself a French bulldog to hug?

The human desire to know *why* is as powerful as the desire to know what happened next, and it is a desire of a higher order. Once we have the facts, we inevitably look for the links between them, and only when we find such links are we satisfied that we “understand.” Rote memorization in a science bores almost everyone. Grasp and a sense of discovery begin only when we perceive *why* “a body in motion tends to remain in motion” and what an immense effect this actuality has on the phenomena of our lives.

The same is true of events in a story. Random incidents neither move nor illuminate; we want to know why one thing leads to another and to feel the inevitability of cause and effect.

Arranging for Plot

A story is a series of events recorded in their chronological order. A plot is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance.

Here, for example, is a series of uninteresting events chronologically arranged.

Ariadne has a bad dream.
 She woke up tired and cross.
 She ate breakfast.
 She headed for class.
 She saw Leroy.
 She fell on the steps and broke her ankle.
 Leroy offered to take notes for her.
 She went to a hospital.

This series of events does not constitute a plot, and if you wish to make it into a plot, you can do so only by letting us know the meaningful relations among the events. We first assume that Ariadne woke in a temper because of her bad dream, and that Leroy offered to take notes for her because she broke her ankle. But why did she fall? Perhaps because she saw Leroy? Does that suggest her bad dream was about him? Was she, then, thinking about him as she broke her egg irritably on the edge of the

frying pan? Maybe Leroy's offer to take notes was the bad dream? What is the effect of his offer? Is it a triumph or just another polite form of rejection when, really, he could have missed class once to drive her to the hospital? All the emotional and dramatic significance of these ordinary events emerges in the relation of cause to effect, and where such a relation can be shown, a possible plot comes into existence.

You can write your story chronologically first, if you want. It's often the easiest. But it's worthwhile going back and looking at it afterward and saying *hmm, do I really have a plot here? Have I really milked these events by linking the events in my story in a meaningful way for the reader?*

One really terrific way to make your characters compelling—and this works in fiction and nonfiction—is to have your main person compelled in two different directions. If you look closely at Alice Munro stories, you'll see how your character always has to choose between two alternatives, neither of which is appealing. Does the character snub a really annoying man who is trying to pick her up or does she allow him to sit beside her on the train and bore her for hundreds of miles? Whatever her choice is, we'll understand more about her as a character by what we see her doing. When your character's dog is attacked by the neighbour's dog, does that person call the animal control officer? Offer to shoot the neighbour's dog if it comes on the property again? Find another alternative? Your character is really angry and wound up and all the solutions seem to have major flaws. This is true of life.

Give your character depth as best you can. We all have strengths and we have our quirks: some people can't resist making puns, others are hard of hearing, some people gush over their little furry pets in a way that's enough to make others want to puke. This is what makes us real as human beings. We don't want perfect heroes and heroines for our stories, we want people we recognize as like ourselves, women who covet expensive shoes and may or may not buy them, men who, in a restaurant lineup can't help looking down the bare back of a woman in front of them who is wearing a *very* low-cut dress. Think about how much you love your best friend. Then think about all the times you have been so mad at that person you want to blow your stack. *That's* the kind of contradiction you want to present with your own characters, the pull-push between love and being annoyed.

One definition of story is: the character wants something. The character can't get something. Then what does he or she do?

So here are your three tips for writing your great story again.

Use scenes as much as possible. That is, use the here-and-now, with dialogue, sounds, smells, taste, touch and sight. Over eighty percent of people have visual as their predominate area of intelligence: make sure you put in lots of visuals for us. Ask yourself: *is this scene clear enough to film?*

In these scenes of yours, make sure the reader is presented with enough dramatic questions to keep us interested. Do not put in so many we get confused or forget what the original tension was about. Just keep on hooking us into turning pages because we want to know *and then what happens?*

Make us care about the *and then what happens* by making us care about your characters. Make us laugh. Make us catch our breath. Show us the dilemmas they face and show us the kind of people they are by the choices they make.

Remember that your readers are going to be fascinated to see your life from the inside, with all the details, quirks and funny things that you know. Do you work in a dog spa? Ooo, give us the details, that's so interesting! As a gardener? Maybe you traveled to Spain and worked as an au pair in order to learn Spanish. Maybe you work from a remote island designing electrical engineering systems for large corporations. Any inside experience that you've had can be used in your story. Readers purely love to know the writer is an expert about some subject. We like to feel we can trust the writer.

You, as a writer, earn that trust from the reader by being honest, as best you're able, by not just putting a happy face on things, or presenting characters slightly or insultingly. Dislike people by all means but allow them the same rich full human dimension you allow yourself. Give them dignity. Focus on your story with intensity. Care about your subject material passionately. Be totally involved in the struggles your characters are going through, the anguish of their choices, and we, the reader, will follow, fascinated, flipping the pages, desperately wanting to know how your story turns out.