

Retirement-Writing

Putting It All Together

There are seven elements of craft that are germane to every novel: Theme, Structure, Plot, Pace, Viewpoint, Characterization and Description.

As we look at each of these, the order in which we discuss them does not indicate their level of importance. It simply makes sense to tackle the broader elements like theme, structure and plot first.

Theme

The creation of most novels begins with a theme. The book then becomes an expression of the author's opinions and attitudes...his/her thoughts about a given subject. When handled well, theme can give intellectual texture to a story.

The author must take great care never to allow the theme to dominate his/her characters to the point that they become one dimensional. He/she must be wary of the tendency to "preach, not show." The message must be developed through the actions and responses of the characters. It must be introduced with subtlety, not hammered home to the reader. A novel is a story, not a polemic.

To avoid creating one dimensional character, options must be given to the people you create. When your characters are in crisis and searching for a solution, you must be careful not to box them into a corner with no way to turn because of their (and your) passionate commitment to the theme.

In the untenable situation with no choices to follow because any other choice would destroy that commitment, the movement of the book is dead-ended. Conversely,

you must guard against developing a character's persona that makes pursuing the commitment totally unrealistic.

By thinking through the entire sequence of the novel, you will ensure that the action never conflicts with the characters' convictions. Certainly you can have the character question the action he/she will take. People in real life are at times tempted to move in a direction that violates their basic principles.

When your character wrangles in his/her mind over the next step to take, that internal struggle adds tension and interest to the book. Ultimately the decision must match the character's persona.

Structure

Now that you have carefully thought through your theme, it follows that you have to mold it into a logical presentation that will intrigue your readers and be credible to them. In real life, situations can occur by chance. Not so in fiction. To be believable, every action must have a reason for occurring.

You, the author, have to prepare the reader for the occurrence by establishing a pattern that leads up to it logically. All of this must fit the identity you have established for this character. Think of this as "cause and effect" or as I have often called it "stimulus and response." Simply put, there must be motivation for every action.

Plot

Quite similar to structure—in fact, many people consider them the same—plot is the skin that wraps the bones of the story and makes it cohesive and believable. As James Bickham states in his excellent book *Scene and Structure*, plot is "nothing more than a

general description of the way one writer might write one novel—the kinds of events he would hope to have happen and generally in what sequence.”

Plot encompasses the ups and downs, the obstacles and the solutions that the protagonist experiences along the trail while moving toward his/her goal.

Scene

Those “ups and downs” are the segments of the story in which the protagonist confronts each challenge. They are the scenes, the moments of external action, not internal contemplation. But scenes do not necessarily correspond to chapters. There may be multiple scenes in a single chapter or a scene can run well beyond a chapter in length.

Each scene presents the protagonist with another hurdle that must be overcome on his/her path to the goal described in the opening graphs of the book. This hurdle moves the protagonist further from the goal by the end of the scene than at its beginning.

The stressful period is then followed by a break in the action, a cooling off, to give the reader a chance to catch a breath and the protagonist the chance to discover a resolution to the conflict that seemed overwhelming in the scene.

In his outstanding book *Writing the Breakout Novel*, Donald Maass writes, “A well-constructed scene has a mini-arc of its own: a beginning, rise and climax or reversal at the end.” Maass is yet another expert confirming the roller coaster flow of the novel’s structure.

Viewpoint

Before putting a finger on the keyboard, you must determine which character will tell the story. It can be told in the third person—you, the author—or in the first person by one of your characters. I counsel beginning writers to stick to third person narration. As

the author you have the ability to peer inside the mind of each character. But if you use a character as a narrator, it is impossible for him/her to know what is going on inside the heads of fellow characters.

To sustain interest, the reader must be able to relate to the protagonist either positively or negatively. This kind of emotion allows the reader to root for the character's success at the time of each challenge or hope for his/her failure. Generally, it is better to have a supportive relationship, allowing the reader to rejoice in the final resolution of the book.

Pace

Although a key goal for the novelist is to sustain tension and interest, a reader requires a respite from the constant strain of following the protagonist through crisis after crisis. That's where pacing enters the mix.

The more relaxed segments of the story generally contain narrative explaining the setting, what is going on in the protagonist's (or any other character's) mind, flashback material, background information and description. The challenge is to maintain the reader's interest even in these slower portions of the book. That is done by introducing new material, something the reader hasn't yet learned, but is germane to the story.

You use short sentences and staccato phrases to attain a high pitch of anxiety when the protagonist agonizes. During the calmer, more contemplative or descriptive, periods, your words and sentences slow down. Passive verbs will moderate your pace, as will longer sentences and polysyllabic words.

One special word of caution: When you return from a break, be it an hour or a day or more, be certain to reread the last few paragraphs you have written so that the pace continues smoothly.

Characterization

Since the actions and reactions of the fictional characters you create are the essence of good fiction, you must take great pains to humanize them and to ensure that every action and all dialogue must be compatible with the image you are creating for each of your people. If your characters are to be believable, there must be a reason for everything they do and say.

To make this happen, you must fully understand every aspect of the characters you draw. Before you begin to write, you draw a sketch of each character covering every element: childhood, parentage, education, friends, area of residence, activities, hobbies, physical appearance, etc, etc.

Your characters cannot be one dimensional. They can't be all perfect or all bad. The best of human being have flaws, some human failings. The most faultless person is entitled at times to contemplate the benefit of an impropriety or worse. Conversely, there is nothing wrong with even the most hardened criminal occasionally reflecting on his dishonesty and perhaps fearing retribution either on earth or in heaven.

Make certain you give each character a distinguishing mark. This can be a physical flaw—a bad scar or a limp, for example. Or it can be an intellectual uniqueness. It is your job to choose the right feature or multiple features to complement the persona you are trying to create.

Do remember that dialogue too can be a defining element. Use it carefully to reinforce the portrait of the character you are trying to paint.

Description

To become fully immersed, your reader must be able to “touch” the people and visualize the places in your novel. Quality description invites the reader to become a participant in the story. But you must describe in very specific terms. Your reader will not bond to the story if your descriptions are too general.

A tree is not just a tree; it is an oak. The place your protagonist lives isn't just a pretty village. It is a pastoral community, set on a series of gentle hills, surrounded by a pine forest on the east, a small lake and rolling meadows in the other directions. The houses generally are small, simple boxes. Window boxes are filled with annuals of varied colors. Gardens of marigold, geraniums and snapdragons front each house.

One caution, however: Too much description can slow down your narrative and destroy the flow of the story. Conversely, too little and your characters become robots, not real people.

There are no set rules to tell you when you are boring a reader or when you leave them feeling empty for lack of detail. It is up to you, the author, to decide when enough is enough...neither too little nor too much. By carefully rereading what you have written, you should be able to make that judgment.