

---

Part I

# Creative Writing

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL



---

# The Architecture of Story

*Lorraine M. López*

Many writers compare stories to dreams, and though this analogy is especially apt, it is nevertheless certainly worth revisiting. Like dreams, stories enable people to synthesize lived experiences, longings, and emotions, distilling the intensity of these through symbolic representation. Also, stories that are well told work the magic of dream by immersing readers in the fiction so effectively that this imagined space, its objects, and inhabitants feel convincing and true to life. But unlike dreams, which happen in spontaneous ways, fictional narratives are deliberately fashioned. With inspiration from Alice Munro's short story "Post and Beam," wherein a historic house provides the central metaphor for a character who discovers her life has been erected upon a faulty foundation of compromise and sublimation of self, perhaps composing story is more like constructing a dwelling than experiencing a dream. In fact, creating a narrative shares much in common with building a home with many rooms, closets and cupboards to intrigue and astonish both inhabitants and guests.

Stories, while inspired by dreams, are the products of an intentional process of many steps – from blueprinting to final touch-up – and like houses, well-constructed stories invite readers to live and breathe within their walls, traveling from room to room, or scene to scene, as they inhabit and experience, along with the characters, their distinctive architecture. Similar to a designed structure, story imposes a certain vision and order on what is initially imagined. In so doing, fictional narratives suggest that particular patterns define what we experience, know, and dream about, and that we can interpret these patterns meaningfully. Early storytelling, such as mythology, folktales or biblical stories, often functioned as proto-science to explain

natural phenomena – such as the genesis of life or arrangement of stars in the sky – imaginatively and memorably. Storytelling also worked as a nascent philosophical framework, wherein cultures could speculate about the meaning of existence as well as work through ethical dilemmas by deploying imaginary characters and situations to enact and resolve these. Additionally, cultural values and historic occurrences have been preserved through narratives. Furthermore, stories offer hope by insisting that human beings possess sufficient agency to interact significantly with destiny – whether by altering its course or by comprehending it in illuminating and life-changing ways. Beyond this, storytelling provides entertainment, offering some shelter against the hardship and monotony entailed in daily living both in the past and now.

The need to tell stories is deeply embedded in our collective psyche and enmeshed with linguistic systems that generate and acquire language. Just as we process the world by telling stories, we produce knowledge through engagement with imagined lives. Furthermore, stories inscribe their tellers into larger cultural and historic narratives, an assertive act that often gives voice and agency to the marginalized and vulnerable. Writers sometimes construct stories in order to synthesize and comprehend personal experiences, fantasies, and emotions in an indirect and symbolic way. Fictional stories simultaneously provide both a protected space and a window view for writers and readers to examine what is challenging – even threatening – to contemplate, let alone process through firsthand experience. Whatever the specific impetus for fictional narratives, the drive to create stories is universal, while the methods of storytelling, just like the styles of building homes, have changed with the passage of time and vary from culture to culture. For instance, early fictional narratives in the English language tended toward great sweeping epics rendered from an omniscient perspective, whereas contemporary fiction focuses more on personal drama, often filtered through a limited and controlled point of view. Despite such changes, the traits that identify story have remained more or less recognizable over time.

### **To Build a Story**

In fictional stories, a character or protagonist is beset by a particular problem that occurs because of some interference in attaining a particular objective. The narrative then traces an uphill trajectory as the character pursues satisfaction of this goal, despite various obstacles. The incline traversed crests at a moment of self-defining choice. Generally speaking, this is the site where the protagonist must decide whether to fulfill or sacrifice the driving desire, but it can also be the juncture at which the character discovers an underlying truth about the self and the object of longing. The resultant crisis moment forces choice that is followed by either change or recognition. Whatever the main character decides results in profound and fundamental transformation, usually signified by an action or a resonant image that clearly demonstrates to the reader how things will be profoundly altered for – or at least perceived differently by – the character in the aftermath of such crisis.

Exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, and resolution are terms familiar to most students of fiction writing as they describe the progression summarized in the previous paragraph. A nineteenth-century German novelist, Gustav Freytag, famously charted this trajectory, forming a triangular shape. Exposition and inciting incident introduce the character and situation, the longing, as well as the impediment complicating satisfaction of such yearning. Rising action inscribes that upward movement made by the protagonist toward his or her goal. Climax, marking the apex point, is the crisis moment, wherein the self-defining choice occurs. Falling action and resolution, or denouement, reveal the change or illumination that results from the decision made at the climax. While story form entertains seemingly endless variations, it is recognizable for these features to readers across a broad spectrum. Even children can perceive when storytelling falls short of form, and many will complain about narratives in which “nothing happens.”

But what we know as readers, we sometimes forget as writers. Emerging writers tend to rely on autobiographical material to compose their first narratives, and often they have insufficient distance from their experiences to shape this material meaningfully, or else they are unwilling or incapable of adapting the facts of what happened to allow for what could have occurred. Such narratives can have the same effect on a reader that a windbag conversationalist has on even the most avid listener. *And then this happened and this happened and this happened*, the windbag drones on, while the expectant look quickly withers on the listener’s face. Sophisticated storytellers know that personal experiences, if used at all, must be significantly mediated for successful retelling as story. They understand that lived experiences are not usually structured as narratives and that restricting stories to the facts of what transpired curtails imaginative possibilities. Successful stories are usually produced from three sources: memory, imagination, and inspiration from other works of literature. With these raw materials, writers structure stories so that they provide the trajectory – in one way or another – that defines them as fictional narratives.

### Drafting the Blueprint: Prewriting

Once a person develops the desire to write stories, he or she must embark on a rather long and repetitive process that begins with the flash of a sustainable idea. People frequently have ideas for creating narratives, and these occur anywhere and at any time. Imagine sitting in a rural clinic’s anteroom, waiting to see a doctor, and glancing about at the various occupants of this room: a rude child, his oblivious mother, an elderly man feigning sleep, a middle-aged woman of working-class background, a silent and brooding farmer, and that farmer’s judgmental and superior wife who – affronted by the incivility of the others – stands while her injured husband claims the last available seat. Soon enough, and if one observes closely, a discernible dynamic among such characters emerges, and with these ingredients, a spark for story can be ignited. This may well have been the case for Flannery O’Connor, as suggested by the

opening of her well-known and often anthologized short story titled “Revelation.” O’Connor, who lived in the rural South and suffered from lupus, no doubt spent considerable time in waiting rooms similar to the one she describes in “Revelation,” and there she may have gazed upon people who inspired the characters she created for this story. Such inspiration likely provoked the curiosity that O’Connor managed to sustain throughout the long process of drafting her story.

Students of writing sometimes complain of having too many ideas and not knowing which to pursue. Sustainability is an effective litmus test for ideation in fiction writing, and ideas will often self-select by persisting in the writer’s thoughts and refusing to go away. But writers can wear out their curiosity for even the most worthy and time-resistant of ideas. They diminish the psychic energy for pursuing flashes of inspiration by discussing these too often with others, verbally telling and retelling the story they ought to be committing to paper. Writing instructors become wary of students who invest too much time and energy at this stage of prewriting, and many experienced writers will abstain from discussing stories they intend to write in order to preserve the drive to explore their inspiration.

Another problem related to expending too much time and energy in the inception and planning stage of developing a story results from overthinking the idea, so the story is fully mapped in the writer’s mind before the first paragraph is drafted. This can result in a predictable and unsurprising story, rather than the journey of discovery that it should be for both writer and reader. Unfortunately, professional writers – especially when applying for grants or residencies – are often required not only to explain the writing projects they intend to develop, but also often to explicate themes that will emerge in such work. For most fiction writers, this kind of directive is akin to demanding a person provide interpretation for a dream that he or she has not yet had, or – in keeping with the building analogy – insisting on a structural inspection before the blueprints have been drawn.

Thematic considerations, by and large, are not the storyteller’s concern when conceiving of and even when composing the work. Just as interpretation cannot occur before a dream has been experienced, theme should not emerge until after the story has been fully drafted. Nevertheless, many inexperienced fiction writers begin with thematic abstractions, rather than character or image, and this inverted process often dooms the narrative to work as a soapbox or pulpit from which the writer can espouse various beliefs and theories. As one might expect, the end result is usually about as exciting as a sermon or a speech. Stories are an art form, and art that serves a particular ideology or agenda risks becoming propaganda. Even so, emerging writers are often filled to bursting with many deeply felt principles. Such writers long to convince others of their beliefs, but for various reasons, ranging from the unpopularity of the form to the effort entailed in properly researching and presenting rhetorical argument, they eschew drafting philosophic essays. Mistakenly, they may believe writing creatively, and packaging abstract theories about life as fiction, is an easier way to persuade readers of their viewpoints.

Though the phrase “creative writing” may suggest that anything goes, drafting fictional narratives, like erecting any structure, involves protracted and deliberate effort. Many formal constraints – such as the aforementioned shaping of story – must be negotiated in producing a recognizable work of fiction. However, freedom to explore and experiment occurs for most writers at the outset of drafting a story. In prewriting, the writer ought to feel uninhibited and unconstrained by convention. Free writing – committing a random jumble or free association of words to paper – is sometimes a useful strategy for getting started on a fictional narrative. Some writers doodle, diagram, or list random-seeming items. Others may prefer prewriting strategies that appear more organized and intentional, such as outlining, plotting scenes, or making checklists of events they plan to include in their narratives. Again, with more involved planning strategies, writers should avoid investing so much creative energy in the blueprinting phase that they have little in reserve for completing the project.

One strategy that can be especially helpful is a mnemonic map, or a progression of concrete objects to guide the writer through the story, much in the way remembered images allow the dreamer to reconstruct a dream. Though it may appear that generating items for such a map is a somewhat random activity, usually the objects that surface in conscious thought are the striking images that writers remember experiencing or imagining. Like elements of dream, these “things” tend to embed themselves in the writer’s memory because they have symbolic value. Often writers are unaware of what these objects mean, and this is optimal since understanding a symbol too well and deploying it too deliberately compromises its efficacy. When rendered in fiction, such items enable the writer to penetrate the depths of the affective filter – bypassing the psychological constraints that prevent writers from tapping into the well of imagination – and to dive deeply into the unconscious, developing story in intuitive and imagistic ways, thereby achieving outcomes that often surprise and delight.

Such objects can also anchor the narrative to the physical world in a recognizable and convincing way. During the course of a day or week or even a month, we collect a vast array of images and most of these are forgotten over time or pushed from the forefront of consciousness by new impressions. Only a few especially tenacious mind pictures remain to provoke the imagination and cause enduring wonderment. William Faulkner claimed the sight of a child wearing muddy drawers while climbing out of a window triggered *The Sound and the Fury*. It is unlikely that Faulkner took the time to deconstruct and analyze that image; instead, he probably just commenced writing the novel.

More often than not, expending too much effort in prewriting is an avoidance technique. Drafting a story can be a daunting, even terrifying experience. Many writers complain of feeling intimidated by the blank page, and some recoil from it altogether when they suffer from writer’s block. The fear that underpins such a blockage usually emanates from perfectionism, reflecting dread of committing errors or producing a narrative that does not align with an original and idealized vision of the

work. Writer's block is a serious impediment that can cause and be caused by stress, or even depression. There are no easy remedies, but when writers realize that in addition to unattainability, perfection also precludes spontaneity – the mistakes, missteps, and detours that have the potential to yield unexpected and worthwhile results – then the paralyzing desire to produce the sublime is often mitigated in a significant way. Furthermore, writers who understand that their initial vision of the narrative is no more than a working plan often feel freer to plunge into the work.

### Building Materials: The Elements of Fiction

Early drafting of a work of fiction can be much like creating a symphony piece, wherein the composer must harmonize musical notes issued from a range of instruments, or to sustain the architectural analogy, an author, like any contractor, must use a wide variety of tools and materials throughout the building process. Of course, different writers have different methods for drafting early versions of their stories, but emerging writers, who believe they can begin by hastily sketching the bare bones of dialogue to fill in later, or that they can start out by intricately describing settings devoid of characters that they have postponed creating, usually find that the “fill-in” added to such work will appear poorly integrated into the story; the joints often show distractingly for the reader. Successful stories result when writers incorporate setting, sensory details, characterization, plot, dialogue, consistent perspective, and effective prose rhythm from the first draft, honing these throughout the long process. Just as no builder would contemplate erecting an entire house using nothing but a handsaw or just a hammer, no writer should be limited to only one or two elements of fiction. Apart from this, accessing the full toolbox of fictional elements enables the writer to immerse the self as well as the future reader convincingly in the fiction.

Setting and sensory details are absolutely essential when it comes to steeping both writer and reader in the physical world of the story. Beginning writers, though, often neglect these elements in the rush to develop plot, or else they neglect plot altogether while under the spell of their own lyrical language. Sometimes they forgo presenting too many particulars because they fear such specific references will render the work inaccessible to the general reading public. *If I set my story in Dubuque, Iowa, these writers may reason, how will readers in Sheridan, Wyoming or San Diego, California, or anywhere but Dubuque, be able to identify with and relate to what happens in it?* This misapprehension results in generalized and unconvincing narratives that not only do not seem to have occurred in a specific place, but often seem not to have happened at all. Skilled writers, like builders and real estate agents, know that location matters; details count.

Paradoxically, the more specifics writers provide in their narratives, the more universal the appeal of their fiction will be, provided these particulars are believably rendered and well balanced with the other elements of fiction. Experienced writers not only embrace the universal appeal of specificity, they also understand what profi-



cient liars know well: details convince. But these must be apportioned properly and perform more than one function. It is not enough to present a detail for its own sake. The details that emerge in stories should also work to serve another element of fiction such as characterization, setting, or tone. This is what makes them significant and essential to the narrative. As such, setting and details must never be inert on the page or one-dimensional as a crude backdrop to a stage. These must be dynamic. They ought to interact in interesting ways with the characters and plot. For example, a setting that works in conflict with characterization is much more engaging to the reader than one that has a neutral effect. Consider the readerly expectation met in encountering on the page a nun in church versus the interest triggered by reading about a nun in a casino. The setting and details that provide dissonance and tension have the greatest potential to sharpen and define characterization, and to fascinate the reader. In fact, setting and details that are vivid and dynamic cannot be glossed over in the way that inert passages of descriptive writing are often skimmed by impatient readers.

Evoking setting and sensory details enables readers to dwell within the fictional walls of the story from its opening pages. When a writer draws on all five senses, setting and details tend to achieve more cohesion by working in concert with one another. Inexperienced writers tend to rely primarily on visual stimuli in creating setting and imagery. While what characters see is certainly important, visual images alone are insufficient for creating a comprehensive experience. Again, skilled fiction writers appeal to all five senses, presenting sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile impressions to conjure setting through imagery. Yet, involving all five senses, like deploying the many elements of fiction, is not at all like ticking off items on a grocery list. Sensory images must emanate in ways that are relevant to the story, and these should be threaded throughout the narrative instead of frontloaded in the initial pages. Additionally, sensory imagery has greater impact on the reader when presented in unexpected and original ways. For example, synesthesia, or presenting a particular sensory impression as if perceived by a different sense – such as apprehension of a sound as a sight or taste – is one useful technique for composing memorable imagery, while clichéd and overly familiar descriptors and comparatives ought to be avoided.

### **Pouring the Foundation: Characterization**

In literary fiction, characters are often the best vehicles for conveying sensory and setting information in unique and memorable ways. If characterization is distinctive and original, the way in which fictional figures perceive the physical world should likewise be as personalized and particular as facial features or a fingerprint. Filtering imagery through well-imagined characters familiarizes readers with context clues in the same way that characters absorb empirical knowledge of the environment: through the senses. Sandra Cisneros says, “We all share one nation and that is the body.” Experienced writers know they must transport readers into imaginary worlds through

the body in order to simulate an experience of fiction. While many readers may not have marched through the jungle as a soldier during the Vietnam War, most do know the experience of hefting heavily weighted burdens for some distance. This is the shared physical knowledge that Tim O'Brien relies upon in transporting readers of his short story "The Things They Carried" into the Southeast Asian countryside during that historic conflict. It matters little whether the world of the story transpires in Southeast Asia or Manchester, Maine or Minsk, on the ocean floor or on one of Saturn's rings. In order to convey readers to another place and another time, writers must forge connections through what is recognizable and familiar. That is, primarily, through the body.

Fiction, like drama, is an interactive art form. This means that readers must engage with a story by actively interpreting words on the page and relating to the fictive world in the way characters do. As such, writers are responsible for creating the experience of drama in their fiction. For this reason, many guides on narrative craft exhort writers to show and not tell when writing fiction. Showing entails creating experiences for the reader by depicting the physical world of the story and filtering this carefully through the human body, while telling – or exposition – enables the writer to disseminate information and manage the passage of time in a concise and efficient way. Both are necessary, but the relationship between showing and telling ought to be analogous to the relationship between nails and lumber. Comparatively speaking, it does not require a great volume of nails (explanation) to support a good deal of lumber (experience of the story).

Throughout the process of composing fiction, writers are beset by a series of decisions, ranging from where and when to set the story to what happens in the narrative. Arguably, the most important among these are choices concerning characterization. In the architectural analogy, characters are the tenants in the house that will be the story. They will dwell within its walls along with readers. Early on in the drafting process, writers must decide what characters will inhabit the story and anticipate how these will interact with readers. Oftentimes ideas about characters – like resonant images – will trigger a narrative, and this is a worthy, even a desirable source of inspiration, especially to writers of literary fiction who prefer to draft character-driven stories, as opposed to plot-driven narratives typical of genre fiction. In its essence, good fiction is about interesting people doing interesting things. Compelling characters enable writers to construct corresponding spirals – strands of plot and characterization that wind and twist together much like the double-helix structure of DNA. Plot emanates from character, and character, in turn, responds to plot in an interactive and dynamic process of give and take, or action and reaction. The critical interplay between character and plot shapes the core identity of story, rendering decisions about characterization crucial to fiction writing.

As such, experienced writers strive to develop characters that have sufficient definition, depth, and complexity to power what some call "the narrative engine," or to direct and lead the helical dance between characterization and plot. Writers who are deeply interested in other people, attuned to social nuance, and oriented to

process rather than outcome tend to have an advantage over more goal-directed individuals when it comes to creating effective characterization. Skilled writers know that whatever the inspiration might be – experience, memory, or imagination, characters must be fully developed and portrayed in ways that encompass and reveal the contradictory nature of human personality. Texts on craft often caution writers about “one-dimensional” or stereotypic characterization, and this is a caveat against presenting only one aspect of a character or on relying upon stock figures in story. In order to provide more dimension and depth, writers must delve deeply into the characters they create to explore a host of seemingly paradoxical traits, as well as a range of qualities and flaws, while presenting a portrayal that is consistent and believable.

First and foremost, in the manner of method actors stepping into a role, storytellers must embrace, even internalize a character’s longing or motivation and swiftly establish on the page what the character wants. Presenting a character that will sustain the reader’s interest means depicting a portrayal that elicits empathy and recognition, and stimulating such emotion entails developing a character the reader identifies with and cares enough about to feel invested in the outcome of the story. Emerging writers who are inclined to draw upon personal experiences tend to draft autobiographical protagonists, and such characters will often emerge as dispassionate, protected by indifference from the pain of disappointment and rejection; they are cool and distant in ways that hint at their authors’ desires for such imperviousness. Or else, as people who are drawn to writing tend to be observers, student writers will mirror themselves in characters that are rather reflective and inactive. But writers who expect readers to invest in characters that they don’t care about or who do not do much are placing an impossibly tall order. Such storytellers would do well to imagine the reader opening the door to a prospective roommate who transmits disaffection and passivity in every possible way. What is to keep that front door from swinging shut and the reader from moving on to interview more engaging and dynamic people?

Perhaps the most effective way to engage readers is by portraying the character’s motivation, which is comprised of longing and practical desire. While longing refers to a deep chasm of yearning that can never be fully satisfied, practical desire indicates pragmatic and attainable aspiration. In Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation,” Mrs Turpin, the aforementioned farmer’s wife, longs for some assurance that her sense of righteousness entitles people of her social class and milieu to a glorious reception in the afterlife, while others will be dispatched below, banished from her sight. Such a paradoxical longing to have goodness recognized by the punishment of others on Judgment Day can never be fulfilled, of course, and pinpricks of humiliation that culminate in assault – when she voices her assumptions of privilege – ultimately drive Mrs Turpin to experience an epiphanic vision that dismantles her longing altogether. Clearly, motivation here is twofold, comprised of deep yearning and practical desire. On the one hand, Mrs Turpin longs for ultimate validation of her goodness, and on the other, she wants to be recognized and respected by others for her self-conceived superiority in her daily life. The longing and desire here are both unsatisfied in this story. But, practically speaking, Mrs Turpin’s desire could be attained if she behaved in such a

way as to elicit recognition and respect from others, rather than merely expecting this as her birthright. This example illustrates how motivation characterizes and vitalizes Mrs Turpin in a distinctive, even unforgettable way.

Beyond shaping and defining character, longing also generates action and reaction – the inexorable chain of causality that is plot. From a character's longing and desire, the conflict of the story arises. Conflict, as defined by mediators, results from competition over resources, values, and/or attention. In complex stories, such as "Revelation," the competition, as one might expect, occurs over all three areas. But overlap often occurs even in more straightforward narratives such as fables and fairytales. In "Snow White," for example, the heroine competes with the Evil Queen for attention (as fairest of the land) and resources (command of the kingdom itself), but there is an underlying competition of values pervading the entire tale: Snow White's honest innocence is pitted against the Evil Queen's scheming cynicism. Distrust, tension, and antipathy erupt when the characters' belief systems clash, and in more sophisticated narratives, such collisions often occur between ethical positions that are equally legitimate, both morally justifiable.

In creating literary fiction, writers strive to portray conflict between well-matched opponents representing worthy positions with high stakes at risk. When reason and virtue align solely with the protagonist, and the antagonist is characterized by inexplicable and extreme malevolence, a hero-versus-villain competition emerges, and melodrama ensues. In such cases, formula trumps form, and a simplistic and predictable narrative unfolds. Creating oppositional forces that are equally righteous and well matched requires both imagination and empathic vision. In "Revelation," the oppositional forces confronting Mrs Turpin, particularly her assailant, are portrayed in such a way that they are not only knowable, but readers can easily relate to the hostility engendered in her antagonist when Mrs Turpin shares her astonishingly narrow-minded worldview. And while Mrs Turpin is bigoted and insulting to others, O'Connor nevertheless depicts her in a manner that elicits readerly compassion.

Creating complex and believable characters, like drafting a story, requires multi-tasking skills. Writers do well to present characters through a variety of means, including the character's words, thoughts, and actions; other characters' reactions to and interactions with the character; and physical description of the character and significant details corresponding to the character's life. Practically speaking, characterization involves descriptive writing, interiority, dialogue, and action. Again, descriptive writing means developing memorable images to appeal to the senses, to establish a physical sense of the character in a fresh and memorable way. Additionally, such description must work in more than one way, and descriptors that create tension or suggest contradiction while remaining consistent and credible to the characterization will capture the reader's attention and sustain interest.

For many writers, dialogue is an effective tool for developing characterization. When characters speak, readers experience these players in their own words, and readers have the opportunity to interpret what characters say in the way they parse and decode conversations in real life, knowing full well that people rarely mean what

they say or say what they mean. Such interpretation engages readers, enabling them to interact with the story. But writers must stimulate this interaction by generating dialogue that accomplishes a number of tasks at one time. At minimum, good dialogue must advance the narrative, characterize the speaker, and entertain the reader. Beyond this, dialogue can work symbolically when characters appear to be discussing one subject while really exchanging ideas and feelings about another matter altogether. Dialogue also establishes tone or mood by revealing the characters' attitudes toward one another and the topics under discussion. Best of all, dialogue provides the vehicle for characters to shift power dynamics among themselves in strategically compelling ways.

### **Framing: Perspective**

Along with decisions relating to setting, imagery, characterization, and plot, writers must also choose how to tell the stories they compose. They must commit to a particular way of narrating the events that occur in fiction. Choices in narration include omniscient, objective, third person, second person, and first person perspectives. The omniscient viewpoint, associated with epics and biblical narratives, can encompass vast fictional territory, but such a perspective, as mentioned earlier, often feels out of place in contemporary English-language narratives, and apart from this, the great breadth of such narration delimits the depth and detail attainable, especially in a short story. The objective point of view allows readers to interact fully with story by forming their own judgments about characters and events, yet this form of narration restricts writers to presenting only what a detached observer would behold without access to thoughts and feelings driving the characters. Third-person limited and unlimited narration allows for presentation of interiority, but the third-person perspective can be problematic when it comes to maintaining consistency and managing narrative distance. Second-person and first-person points of view are much easier to control for consistency and they offer greater intimacy with characters, but just in the way that familiarity breeds contempt, such intimacy is not always desirable or sustainable. Many writers discover that while first- and second-person narratives can be the easiest to generate, they are often most challenging to write successfully.

Whatever decision the writer makes with regard to perspective, consistency and comprehensibility in narration will be the expectation of the reader. Emerging writers often experience significant difficulty in managing perspective. Many have trouble conceptualizing how perspective works, and because of this, they fail to notice when it becomes unmoored in their own narratives. Basically, in the first few sentences of a story, an author establishes ground rules or issues a certain pledge to the reader, in which an overall promise is made to treat the reader fairly and consistently throughout the narrative. This commitment entails informing the reader as to what kind of story will unfold and how it will be told. Just as one cannot begin narrating a story in the first person and then inexplicably shift to an omniscient or objective point of view,

one cannot begin a third-person limited narration in one character's perspective and then present a thought or feeling experienced by another character without jarring the reader. So if a story begins in the third person that is limited to a particular character, the writer commits to presenting this perspective consistently. There are times, though, when the writer may discover another viewpoint is necessary to illuminate aspects of the narrative outside the purview of the narrating character. In this case, the writer might shift the point of view in a regular way (usually signaled by a formatting change, such as a section break or italicization) that does not confuse the reader or interrupt the flow of the story. The writer must devise some means to alert the reader to perspective shifts that occur in the narrative and use such shifts in a reliable way throughout the story. If it is only necessary to provide this added perspective a few times, the writer would be well advised to reconsider shifting viewpoint and to develop another means for divulging information to which the narrating character is not privy.

### Construction: The Writing Process

Once decisions regarding setting, characterization, and perspective have been made, writers often set about drafting the work. In doing so, skilled authors pay attention to the rhythm of words on the page and the level of discourse. They will often pause at the end of passages and read the work aloud, listening for the flow and authenticity of the language. At this stage, as well as during revision and editing, it is critical to be aware of phonemic relationships between words, in addition to being on the lookout for unintentional rhyming words, distracting meter, and words or phrases repeated too often or in too close proximity to one another. More importantly, writers should be ever vigilant for uneven registers of diction and pretentious language. Experienced writers recognize their "darlings" as William Faulkner would say in reference to deliberately clever wording that draws attention to itself and away from the story, and such writers will mercilessly excise such indulgences. But student writers, often fresh from high-school classes where they were lauded for including multisyllabic words in their work, tend to resist the idea that less is more when it comes to language. Even professional writers will compose early drafts that are overwritten, rife with adjectives and adverbs instead of strong and precise nouns and verbs. Reading work aloud is the best way to uncover unwieldy constructions, infelicitous phrasing, and disingenuous language. The ear detects what the eye will gloss, especially for copious readers who tend to supply missing words and correct grammatical errors automatically when absorbing a block of text.

After a story is drafted, revised, edited, read aloud, and proofed by its author, the next phase of the process commences: yet *more* revision, *more* editing. In this phase, some writers will put the story away, removing it from sight for a few days before revisiting the work with greater detachment. Others will send the work to a few trusted readers for their responses. Student writers usually submit their drafts to a



workshop for critique by peers and feedback from an instructor. In one way or another, most authors of stories seek other opinions on their work before they are ready to submit it for publication. This process provides necessary viewpoints that are inaccessible to the author, who will likely be too close to the story and therefore myopic about the writing. What is clear in the writer's mind sometimes doesn't translate onto the page, and outside readers can pinpoint places where obscurity and confusion occur. Sandra Cisneros says that writing creatively is like cutting one's own hair. "We need someone to tell us how to make it even in the back." Peer readers perform the function of sharing critical information outside of the author's purview. But not all peer review is helpful or enlightening. Writers do well to select impartial and experienced readers, preferably writers themselves with whom they can exchange work. Astute student writers in workshops soon glean which readers best understand an author's vision for the work and provide the most valuable critique, even if it is not always what the writer wants to hear.

Revision means achieving detachment to apprehend a new vision of the work. At this stage, metaphors, symbols, even thematic undercurrents emerge, and peer readers can often point these out for the writer, who can then choose to inflect or mute these in subsequent drafting. Among other alterations at this stage, scenes can be added or deleted, characters developed or sometimes excised or even combined, pacing manipulated, and the showing-to-telling ratio adjusted. Despite the many changes a writer might make during this phase, revision is not rewriting. To extend the building metaphor, revision is likened to remodeling a kitchen or knocking out a wall to create more room space, while rewriting can be compared to razing the entire structure, say a ranch-style home, and replacing it with a Swiss chalet. Apart from the address, no one would recognize the residence. Revision preserves the integrity and essential identity of a story, fortifying an original structure that remains intact and sound. Consultation with specialists – peer readers, instructors, and mentors – enables the writer to make careful changes to improve the story.

Outside readers can also help writers with editing: nipping and tucking language, correcting continuity problems, and other minor repairs to the story. Knowledgeable fellow writers will provide practical help with punctuation and dialogue presentation, but the best instructors and workshops train writers to become topnotch editors of their own work. Self-editing entails objectivity and awareness of one's bad habits and weaknesses when it comes to language and mechanics, as well as mastering a few practices and exercises that are customized to address such shortcomings. For instance, some authors will eliminate unnecessary verbiage, perform "sponge" edits to replace modifiers with more precise nouns and verbs, or highlight all filters to determine whether or not these are necessary to the story. Alice Munro, invoked earlier, is notorious for retyping story drafts from memory with the idea of retaining only what is essential to the narrative.

Again, the idea of writing creatively suggests to many the wrongheaded notion that imaginative expression trumps all else and that following rules – even those pertaining to language and mechanics – somehow impedes such expression, shackling

the artist's creative impulses. In fact, writing creatively and composing stories means sharing a vision with the world, and in order to accomplish this, communication is essential. Stories that are hastily written, unrevised, and unedited are about as inviting to readers as ill-tended and shabbily constructed houses. Such narratives are not likely to be published by editors, who interpret flaws in the work as lack of expertise and commitment on the part of the writer. In fact, publishers are so inundated with submissions by writers that to manage their mountainous workloads they will often disqualify work that is unpolished after the first page.

Nevertheless, the temptation is strong, especially among newcomers to writing, to disregard convention and to experiment with story form, characterization, narration, and even language and mechanics. Emerging writers sometimes yearn to break all the rules and invent new ways to tell stories, and mostly to play fast and loose with perspective, possibly due to the challenges entailed in applying this consistently. Or else they may believe they can take shortcuts by drafting entire narratives in an inspired rush, and, convinced of the greatness of their work, they often refuse to revise and edit or sometimes even reread what they have produced. But yielding to such temptation before mastering story form and the elements of fiction rarely turns out well and can add significant time to what is already a long patience.

Though the elements of fiction and the stages of drafting a story are presented one after another here, these are not discrete steps to follow in a sequence. Instead most writers will find themselves continuing to go over a story, combing through it again and again to resolve concerns pertaining to setting, characterization, imagery, and plot. It's not unusual for an author to draft an entire narrative before discovering the point of view is off and that it must be shifted to another perspective or that the turning point in the plot ought to take the narrative in an entirely different direction. Over time, the ratio of time spent drafting stories in relationship to the time spent revising and editing fiction will gradually become inverted so that writers who start out expending 80 or 90 percent of their effort in composing often find themselves devoting that same percentage of work to revision and editing, allotting significantly less time to creating new narratives.

Popular culture mythologizes the inspired genius swiftly and unerringly generating sublime works of art. In the film *Amadeus*, Mozart is portrayed composing musical scores without altering a note to appeal to this romantic notion. In fact, Mozart struggled over his work, adapting and developing his music even after it had been performed. Like creating great music or erecting sound and inviting living spaces, writing fiction is comprised of much trial and error, demanding flexibility and an unflagging determination to improve. At times, storytelling can be a Sisyphean endeavor, especially for beginners undertaking their first stories. Dedicated writers, like expert builders, develop the habit of meticulousness and vigor for recursive tasks to the extent that such drive becomes similar to obsession. These tend to be people for whom the only thing more challenging than writing is not writing anything at all.



---

REFERENCES

- Cisneros, Sandra. "Macondo Workshops Opening Remarks." July 29, 2007.
- Munro, Alice. "Post and Beam." In *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986.
- O'Brien, Tim. "The Things They Carried." In *The Things They Carried*. New York: Mariner Books, 2009.
- O'Connor, Flannery. "Revelation." In *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1965.