

Chapter 1

Preparing to Create Your Written Masterpiece

In This Chapter

- ▶ Starting your creative writing
 - ▶ Thinking about the process
 - ▶ Embracing confusion
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The saying goes that all people have a book inside them. Certainly, all people have their own life stories and many want to write theirs down; everybody has dreams, ideas, hopes and fears, as well as a certain amount of imagination. All that most people lack is the courage and know-how to turn their chosen idea into a story that others want to read.

Many people think that if you want to be a writer, you have to leave your job (or never start one!) and sit all day in a freezing garret. In fact, most writers have other jobs as well – because they have to! Writers write in bed in the mornings before anyone else is awake, they stay up late writing when everyone else has gone to bed, they write on their commute to work, they write in their lunch hours, they write in any small bit of time they have. They write because they want to and because they have something unique to say – while still paying the bills in other ways.

Being passionate about what you write is important, because otherwise you're highly unlikely to find the energy and commitment to finish. A story needs to be burning inside you, wanting to escape. You should love your characters, be fascinated by your themes and want to find out how your story ends.

But good writing is more than just a passion – it's also a craft. You need to discover the techniques and tips of the trade and then practise them to help you make the project you have in mind as good as it can possibly be – which is where this book and this introductory chapter come in! I lead you through some things to consider before you start writing and discuss the basics of creative writing and creative thinking.

Planning for the Writing Journey

Before you physically start writing, a little preparation is a good idea to get the best out of the valuable time you devote to your writing. In this section I discuss helpful ideas such as setting targets and staying confident, as well as how much you do or don't need to think about genre, scope and the title of your work before you start writing.

Setting your writing goals

One of the most helpful things you can do when starting any writing project is to set yourself some simple, realistic and achievable goals and targets. Here are a few examples:

- ✓ **Task targets:** Such as developing a character, finishing a chapter or planning a scene.
- ✓ **Time targets:** A certain number of writing sessions of fixed length, such as three half-hour sessions a week.
- ✓ **Word targets:** A certain number of words or pages, such as 500 words or three pages per week.

None of these targets sounds like much, but you may be surprised how much you achieve if you keep going with them week after week.



If you set writing goals that are too optimistic, you're likely to fail, which undermines your writing instead of supporting it. The good thing about modest targets, especially at the beginning of a project, is that when you exceed them and replace them with slightly more ambitious ones, you can see that you're making real progress. If you do find that you're struggling with the targets you've set, revise them downwards until you have something that you feel is appropriate for you.



Write down an overall long-term goal as well, such as 'I'll have a first draft by this date next year'; it really helps to keep you on track.



Update your goals at regular intervals to keep them relevant and so that you always have something to aim for. Your goals inevitably change as the work develops.

People differ in their strengths and weaknesses: some are planners and others prefer to plunge in and get started. If you're a planner, plunging in probably makes you feel completely overwhelmed and all at sea, and your story's likely to peter out quite quickly. Therefore, you'll find that working out a rough plan or timeline for your story is beneficial, and perhaps even mapping out key scenes before you begin (see Chapters 3 and 19). If you're a more instinctive writer, and planning is a barrier rather than an aid to progress, just jump in and write every day, and watch your story gradually take shape.

Locating the appropriate genre

Books are defined principally by their genre. Go into any bookshop or library and you'll find books listed under headings such as action/adventure, children's, crime, fantasy, historical, horror, mystery, romance, science fiction, thriller, women's and young adult.

Literary fiction is usually listed under general fiction but is sometimes considered a genre on its own. *Literary fiction* is hard to define, but the term is often used to describe books that are original or innovative in form, show deep psychological insight and act metaphorically as well as literally – meaning that you can dip beneath the surface of the story and characters to examine themes or issues or to extract multiple meanings. I cover these sorts of issues and techniques in Chapters 15 and 16.



Before you start writing, a good idea is to consider what genre your story will fall into. Also, read some of the most successful examples of this genre to see how they work. Ask yourself the following types of question:

- ✔ **What's the rough length of books in your chosen genre?**
- ✔ **Do they tend to be written from a first-person or a third-person viewpoint and do they contain one or several points of view?** (Check out Chapter 8 for more details on point of view.)
- ✔ **Are they primarily *plot driven* (that is, the story is the most important element, and the characters mainly exist to fulfil a role within it) with lots of action (see Chapter 12), or *character driven* (the characters' choices and actions drive the story) with lots of internal reflection?**
- ✔ **Is the language simple and direct with relatively short sentences and paragraphs, or are the sentences more complex with more detailed description, including similes and metaphors?** (Chapter 15 has loads of info on these figures of speech and Chapter 11 covers using all the senses for intense descriptions.)

Literary fiction tends to be character driven and commercial fiction plot driven, although this isn't always the case. Many popular and successful novels have well-drawn characters who seem real and that readers can identify with, as well as a well-structured and compelling plot. Thrillers, detective stories and adventure novels tend to fall into the plot-driven category. (The chapters in Part IV have lots of useful information on plot and structure.)



Sometimes people say to me that they don't want to read other novels in their genre, because they don't want to be influenced by them. Unfortunately, this often means that they inadvertently write something that's already been done or that completely fails to match the expectations that readers have when they buy a book in this genre. My mantra is read, read, read! (See the nearby sidebar 'Taking lessons from other writers'.)

Taking lessons from other writers

You can discover an enormous amount about writing from reading books, novels and stories of all kinds. When you read, think consciously about the way the book is written. Look to see whether it's divided into sections, parts and chapters. If so, are the chapters short or long, or varied in length? Are the different parts of equal size? How many points of view and locations exist in the story? (Check out Chapter 20 for loads more on structuring your work.)

Look at the techniques the writer uses to convey the way that people speak in dialogue, to describe a scene or build suspense. See how the plot unfolds, how secrets are hidden and how clues are revealed. Examine how events are foreshadowed and surprises created. (Chapters 4 and 6 discuss dialogue, and Chapters 14 and Chapter 21 creating and maintaining suspense.)

Picking passages you really like from a book and imitating them as closely as possible using your own settings, characters and story can be helpful. It helps you to see how really good fiction works. Consider these to be exercises, like a musician playing scales or an artist making a

sketch from a famous painting. You don't even need to put them in your work in progress, although you can use them, often altered, if they fit.

I was once working on a novel based on my experience of working in a women's prison. The beginning just wouldn't come right, so in exasperation I picked up a copy of one of my favourite novels, John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). It starts with a terse dialogue at Checkpoint Charlie, where the main character is waiting for someone to cross over. I immediately started my novel with a tense dialogue just before the main character meets the disturbed woman who is the focus of the narrative, ditching the first 20 pages I'd written!

However much you're influenced by other books and other writers – and all writers are – beware of writing something that's too close to a book that exists already. This can constitute *plagiarism* – legally defined as the 'wrongful appropriation, stealing and publication' of another author's 'language, thoughts, ideas or expressions' and passing them off as your own.



Beware of mixing different genres, and in particular of switching genre mid-novel. A romantic story that suddenly changes into a political satire, or a crime novel where the corpse turns out to have been abducted by aliens, defies publishing conventions and gives readers an unpleasant jolt.

Creating the right title

The right title is vital, because it tells readers something important about the story. You don't need to have a title before you start writing your story. Many writers haven't found a title until very late in their project or even after it has finished. Occasionally, literary agents or publishers suggest the title or change the one you already have, and sometimes books have different titles in different countries, especially when they're translated.



You can take your title from different aspects of your story:

- ✓ **Name of the main character or one around which the plot pivots:** For example, *David Copperfield*, *Jane Eyre*, *Ethan Frome*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Emma*, *Rebecca*. You can also use a character's profession (*The Piano Teacher*, *The Honorary Consul*, *The Secret Agent*, *The Professor*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *A Man of the People*) or some kind of description of them (*The Woman in White*, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *A Good Man in Africa*, *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*).
- ✓ **Relationship between two characters:** For example, *The Magician's Nephew*, *The Time Traveller's Wife*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Sons and Lovers*, *The Spy Who Loved Me*.
- ✓ **Significant place:** For example, *Wuthering Heights*, *Mansfield Park*, *Revolutionary Road*, *Middlemarch*, *Solaris*, *Gorky Park*.
Theme of the book: For example, *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The End of the Affair*, *The Sense of an Ending*.
- ✓ **Biblical or literary quotation:** For example, *East of Eden*, *Gone with the Wind*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Present Laughter*, *The Darling Buds of May*. Or you can adapt one, for example, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*.
- ✓ **Significant object:** For example, *Brighton Rock*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Subtle Knife*, *The Moonstone*, *The Scarlet Letter*.
- ✓ **Central element of the plot:** For example, *The Hunt for Red October*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, *The War Between the Tates*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*.
- ✓ **Word or phrase buried deep in the story:** For example, in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, the phrase comes on the last page.

Titles arrive in all sorts of ways

The now famous titles of many books weren't the author's first choices: George Orwell's *1984* was going to be called *The Last Man in Europe*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was going to be *Atticus* before Harper Lee decided the title was too narrowly focused on one character, and Jane Austen's original title for *Pride and Prejudice* was *First Impressions*.

Books often have different titles in different countries, even when they share the same language. For example, Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* was published in the US as *Edge of Day*,

and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. *The Bridges of Madison County* was originally published with the title *Love in Black and White*, and only became a bestseller after the title was changed.

The title can be the first thing that comes to an author, though. Jonas Jonasson, author of *The Hundred-year-old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared*, so loved the title after he thought it up that he felt compelled to write the book itself!

The title you choose highlights in readers' minds a certain element in the story. For example, *The Hobbit's* alternative title was *There and Back Again*, which emphasised the journey the main character takes.



TIP

Don't let not having a good title stop you from getting started or indeed finishing your book!



EXERCISE

You may not find the final title of your story or novel for some time, but try this to help you get at least a working one:

1. **Make a list of different possible titles for your story from each of the preceding categories.** Think about which one you like best and why.
2. **Pick a working title for your story.** Having one to hand often helps even if you decide to change it later.

Discovering the scope of your book

Don't worry too much about fixing the scope of your book before you start writing or even while you're drafting it. Many writers find that their story changes and grows as they write it. A novel you begin as a light-hearted romance may take a dark turn when the handsome love interest turns out to be concealing a terrible secret; a crime story can transform into an exposé of the poverty and suffering of a marginalised community; a straightforward thriller may turn out to have a supernatural element.

Sometimes only at the end of a draft do you really know who your characters are and have a good idea of where the story is going. So just keep drafting and leave editing and rewriting until much later. You can always go back and transform the first part of your story so that it fits in with your later discoveries, or expand your original idea to accommodate a new idea or additional characters (see Chapter 22).



If your story takes an unexpected turn, don't stop yourself from writing. If you block yourself because you want to stick to your original idea or are surprised by some of the material coming through, you'll almost certainly find that all the life goes out of your writing.



The foreword to the second edition of JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1955, George Allen & Unwin) begins with the words: 'This tale grew in the telling'. Tolkien started writing a sequel to *The Hobbit*, but the story took over and turned into a massive three-volume epic aimed more at adults than children.

Silencing the inner critic

I believe that drafting out your entire story before you start to edit anything is best (I discuss editing in Chapters 24 to 26). I read about novelists who write a thousand words in the morning, edit their text and then move on the next day. This may work for experienced writers (though not all), but it's seldom useful when you're starting out. As soon as you look at your work, that voice starts up in your head saying, 'This is rubbish; it's never going to work. You'll never make it as a writer. Go back and change everything.' Somehow, you have to find out how to banish that voice!

The best way I know to get rid of that voice is not to edit at all while you're at an early stage. Just keep writing. Resist the temptation to go back and look at what you've written previously, unless you really have to check a fact such as what name you gave a character or on what day of the week a certain event happened. But don't get out that red pen or turn on the word processor's track changes function and start going over your work, because you may soon find that you have no writing left! You have plenty of time to go over what you've written when you get to the end of your draft.

Reviewing the Creative Writing Process

In this section I have a look at the various stages involved when you want to write a novel, a piece of narrative non-fiction or a series of short stories.

No single right way to set about any creative process can apply to everyone: different people find that different methods of working are best for them. At the beginning, just try out a few different ways of working until you find what clicks with you.

Taking your first steps

When you start writing, the important thing to do is just to gain confidence.



Get a notebook, pen and paper or the kind of computer that suits you – laptop, tablet, desktop – and jot down ideas, anecdotes, sketches, key phrases, character outlines and memories. Write down anything you like, as long as you're writing. If you have a particular project in mind or a story that you want to tell, just write down anything connected with it. At this stage, you simply want to get your pen moving or some words on the screen, so that you have some material to work with. I talk more about recording and using ideas in Chapter 2.

Sometimes when you start a project you have an idea of a key scene: maybe two characters meeting, having an argument or confrontation, or a character discovering something, someone having an important realisation, or a dramatic event taking place. Sometimes ideas come from a family story or something that happened to you or someone you know. If this type of situation applies, begin writing from these starting points.



At this point, don't worry about the quality of what you write: just begin somewhere. The more you get down on paper or on screen, the more confident and skilful your writing becomes. Developing your writing voice takes time, and so don't hurry it or expect too much too soon.



If you find that you're constantly struggling to get started at the beginning of each writing session, try leaving a sentence unfinished so that you can complete it when you next sit down. Alternatively, try making a list of ideas. Usually, getting started takes a while, but then your mind is buzzing by the end of a session and ideas arise more freely – so take advantage of this to help you get started next time.



Here's an exercise to ensure that you always have a repository of ideas to turn to whenever you're stuck. Write down three of the following:

- ✓ **Significant memories from your character's past:** These can be adapted from your own memories. Check out Chapter 3 and Chapter 19 for how to use memories.

- ✔ **Facts about your main characters:** Check out Chapter 3 for how to give them convincing backgrounds and Chapter 5 for detail on creating them physically. Chapters 4 and 6 guide you through teaching them to speak.
- ✔ **Objects your main character possesses:** Chapter 13 has several tips on this aspect.
- ✔ **Incidents your main character can experience:** Read Chapter 18 for all about plotting events for your characters.
- ✔ **Desires or fears of your main character:** Chapters 7 and 9 discuss providing characters with complex inner lives.

Gearing up for the long haul

Writing a whole book is going to take you a long time, and so don't put undue pressure on yourself by trying to get it all done too quickly. Slow and steady is the best way forwards. If you're always rushing ahead to get onto the next scene, you don't allow yourself the challenge and the pleasure of going deeply into the scene that you're writing now.

The fashionable Buddhist concept of mindfulness is really useful for creative writing, because you want to create a space in which you and your characters deeply experience the 'now' of your story. If you're constantly thinking back to previous scenes and worrying that they aren't good enough, or stressing about what on earth you're going to write next, you can't slow down and concentrate on what's happening to your writing or your characters in the present moment.



Every paragraph or page that you write is an important step towards your goal.

Writing in a spiral path

Writing a book isn't a linear process: you don't start at the beginning and go in a straight line towards the end. On the contrary, sometimes you seem to be going backwards rather than forwards, round and round in circles or not going anywhere at all!



I prefer to see my writing as being like walking on a spiral path, sometimes facing backwards, sometimes forwards, but always moving slowly towards my goal. You get a whole lot of writing done only to discover yourself back with the same scene or dilemma or conflict that you were wrestling with earlier.

However, you're never exactly back in the same place, because you've learned a whole lot more about your characters and your story in the meantime, and so you can write the scene again better than you did the first time around.

Using creative writing exercises

The single most helpful tool for developing your creative writing skills is to do creative writing exercises: quick, focused pieces of work that you can complete in 5 to 20 minutes. This book is chock-full of such useful exercises designed to illustrate different aspects of the writing process.



When doing these exercises, I suggest you get started right away and just jot down the first thing that comes into your head without thinking too much about it. These spontaneous and unedited thoughts are often the most useful. As you get used to doing the exercises, jumping in and writing straight away without much prior thought or effort gets easier and easier.

Sometimes you don't see the point of an exercise or feel that what you've written is never going to fit into your story. This doesn't matter. You almost certainly learned something useful and are mastering techniques to put into use at another time or in another place. Don't worry if the results of the exercise don't always seem that great – they're quick writing exercises and no one is expecting perfect prose!

Some of the exercises involve random prompts or elements you can introduce into your story. One problem with writing is the feeling that you have to supply all the ingredients out of your own head, which isn't the way real life works – after all, you don't choose the weather, who sits next to you on the bus or what strange object a friend will leave behind in your house! Read Chapter 13 for more on creative use of objects in your stories.



Using random elements from your environment enables you to create a more complex and lifelike story, as well as giving you new ideas that you can often connect in a fresh and original way.

Living with Creative Confusion

In a non-creative project, having lots of notebooks and computer files with slightly different versions of the same thing is a bad sign. But creative projects, particularly in their early stages, benefit from this level of uncertainty. Having five separate start plans and three endings is fine (I discuss writing openings and endings in Chapters 17 and 23), as is having no clear idea of on what day of the week different events in your story happen.



Resist the urge to ‘tidy’ your work as you go. A far better idea is to keep writing and then return when you have a first draft to make your final selections and examine the finer details. Don’t expect your writing to come out perfectly first time. You have to adjust to a certain amount of chaos. Many people resist the messiness involved in producing creative work, but it’s inevitable if you want to produce something worthwhile.

Writing in chaos doesn’t mean, however, that your writing space has to be a complete tip (although mine often is when I’m in the middle of a project). Some people just can’t work in a messy environment. However, others can’t work if everything is too neat and tidy. Find out what kind of person you are, and don’t fight against it.

Consider these tips to help you create some order in the chaos:

- ✓ **Get different coloured notebooks or one with different coloured pages.** Write plot ideas in the blue notebook (or on the blue pages), character things in the red, random observations in yellow and so on. This approach makes finding something you’ve written far easier later on.
- ✓ **Give chapters working titles.** Do so even if you aren’t going to keep them in the end.
- ✓ **Write a brief summary of what happens at the top of each chapter.** This helps you to find key scenes easily.
- ✓ **Number and title computer files for easy reference.** Group them in folders and subfolders.
- ✓ **Keep everything.** Buy box files and folders to store your material.



One area in which you may need to be systematic is in sorting files on your computer. Because you can’t access things on a computer at a glance as you can with a notebook or typescript, you can easily lose track of what you’ve written. Create folders with headings such as ‘notes’, ‘sketches’, ‘characters’ (use the names of your main characters) and clearly number each draft. Give chapters a working title in the file name so that you can identify what each chapter is about with no hassle.

Allowing yourself to make mistakes

People learn by making mistakes. Many creative breakthroughs occur when you make a mistake. If you keep going along a safe track, you never discover the exciting avenues you may have gone down if you’d allowed yourself a little more latitude. It’s a bit like tourists who stick to the main areas instead of exploring the interesting backstreets where they may discover a charming café or hidden gem.

You often need to start a story or try out a scene in a particular way in order to discover that it isn't working. You're working without knowing enough about the world of your story, and so you're bound to make false starts and go down dead ends. Sometimes you may go down a side turning and realise that lovely as the scene you've written is, it doesn't belong in the narrative you're currently writing. You can always file these scenes for later in the story or for another project. Sometimes, however, you discover something absolutely vital to your story that you hadn't realised before. Unless you write the scene, you'll never know which way it'll go or whether it'll introduce something new and exciting into your story.

The more you write, the more you develop a kind of instinct that helps you discard certain options in advance. But when you begin, you really don't know what's going to be best, and you never will know – unless you try out different approaches.



Almost all writers create far more material than they ever use in their final version, but this doesn't matter. What you see in the finished book is a bit like the one-tenth of an iceberg that appears above the surface of the water. The rest of the material may be hidden or discarded, but it's still a vital part of creating your story.

If you like to plan, you often find that your story refuses to stick to the structure you work out in advance. Maybe you planned that halfway through your novel, character A would divorce character B, but when you get there you realise that your character would never have the courage to confront his wife. You then have to restructure the second part of the book, and the result is usually far stronger than if you'd stuck to your original plan.



Think about making a film: it usually needs a large number of 'takes' to get a scene absolutely as the director wants it. And some of the items that ended up in Picasso's wastepaper basket have been sold for huge sums of money!



Writers who've made 'mistakes' and had to correct them include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Ian Fleming, who both killed off their heroes, Sherlock Holmes and James Bond, only to have to backtrack later. The inventor of Sherlock Holmes needed some ingenuity to explain how his character survived what seemed a certain death. When JRR Tolkien wrote the original version of *The Hobbit*, he hadn't yet decided that Bilbo's ring was the One Ring, and so Gollum wasn't overly upset when he lost it. After publishing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien had to go back and correct this incident for all future editions of *The Hobbit*.

Writing what you want to write

One of the most important things I want to stress is that when you start out as a writer you must write *what you want to write* and not allow yourself to be persuaded by anyone to write anything else. Even if you're not sure precisely what you want to write, and your thoughts seem a bit confused at first, don't change what you're writing in order to comply with other people's ideas; after all, you've not written your novel before, and so some uncertainty is inevitable.



You write best when you write the kind of fiction you like to read. Many novelists say that they write the books they want to read – the books didn't exist before, and so they had to create them!



Use this exercise to help you clarify what you love about other people's books:

1. **Make a list of your top ten favourite books of all time.**
2. **Mull over what you love about them: characters, plot (see Chapter 18), setting (see Chapter 10) or perhaps a mixture of all three.**
3. **See whether you can spot any similarities in theme, structure or writing style.**

Nobody's forcing you to write; you do so because you want to, for its own sake, and not because you feel that you ought to write or you think it's going to make you rich and famous. So if you're going to take the time and trouble, you may as well write the book you really want to write and not the book you think will appeal to others.

Books and writing are personal. Some writers I can't stand and others I love, and the books I love sometimes leave other people cold. Some books were bestsellers in their time but have long been out of print and forgotten, while other books that were rejected or reviled at the time are now highly respected. Some people will like what you write and others will hate it.



Don't try to please everybody, because you won't. As the saying goes, in trying to please everyone you almost inevitably end up pleasing nobody.

Never worry about what anyone else may think of your work. As soon as you do, you start restricting your writing to fit in with what you think others would like or consider appropriate, or to conceal aspects of yourself you think people may disapprove of.

In particular, don't worry about what literary agents or publishers may think in the early stages of a project. When you begin, you're so far away from being published that thinking about it in any way except as a distant and ultimate goal is pointless. It often just causes you to freeze and give up.

Many people think they have to write in a special way when they're writing fiction, to develop a distinctive 'voice' or 'style' that impresses people. Many published writers do have an individual and recognisable style, but usually they took many years to develop it. I think that all writers have their own voice, just as you can usually recognise everyone you know by the sound of their unique, individual voice. The best way to develop your writing voice is simply to write as clearly, directly and unaffectedly as you can.



Never show your work to friends, family, lovers or indeed anybody too soon. They simply pick up on aspects that you know aren't perfect, which just makes you feel negative about your writing. Also, such people often don't have the knowledge or skills to make any constructive criticism. They may just tell you it's wonderful because they don't want to hurt your feelings or spoil your relationship! Or they may make vague comments such as 'I found this scene boring' or 'I didn't like that chapter', but you won't know what on earth to do about it because they haven't been specific enough.

Writing a book is such hard work that you really have to be obsessed by it. There's no point spending all that time and energy to write something that doesn't totally grip you. You'll find that writing about a topic that really inspires you and that you already know something about, or which you're dying to learn about, is much easier. Let your pen follow your heart and lead you where it wants to go.



Write a list of the things that fascinate you: perhaps a culture, a language, a sport, an art form, an aspect of human psychology, a historical period, a country or district, a profession, a hobby. Are any of these included in your story idea, and if not, why not?

Bad, teacher; good teacher

My eldest son learnt the cello. His first teacher was very enthusiastic, but at a certain point my son stopped making progress. She made comments like 'That note was flat' or 'Your bow is making a scratchy sound', but didn't explain what he should do about it.

His next teacher watched him play and then said 'If you lift up your left elbow, you'll find it

much easier to stretch out your arm and reach that top note' and 'I noticed that your bow was a little too close to the bridge in that passage'. Almost immediately, his playing started to develop in leaps and bounds.