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Introduction

A. The story in literary fiction

Stories are told for many reasons—information, pride, teaching, rendering, warning, entertainment, intimidation. In its basic form, a story starts, something happens, and the story ends. But authors of literary fictional stories have more to consider. The literary fictional story builds on the evolution of the story from Greek poetic narratives, Biblical stories, Greek stage drama, medieval sung tales, folk tales, and the development of the written novel and short fiction from the eighteenth century to today.

Actually, written words are an awkward way to tell a story—and it is hard to do it well. But the successful literary story gives the reader special benefits of enjoyment and memorability, and it provokes thought at levels no other form of storytelling does.

A literary story is neither a memoir that tells the truth of what happened, nor genre fiction, such as mystery, romance, detective, or science fiction, that must restrict itself to precise reader expectations. Literary stories emerge from the author’s imagination, with strong characters who drive the plot and involve the reader. The literary story is an art form that should be preserved and allowed to evolve; it is created in the universe of imagination and provides maximum enjoyment and enlightenment for the reader. It stands alone.

This manual is dedicated to the creation of a great literary story that provides enjoyment and enlightenment for the literary reader and contributes to our literary heritage.

B. The essence of a great storyteller

Writers please readers by telling stories that are enjoyable and memorable. To be memorable, a story must have some emotional and intellectual impact. When a great story is finished, readers believe nothing in their lives will ever be exactly the way it was before they experienced the story. This awe-filled awareness comes from a new recognition or reversal of thinking, or a feeling that emerges when characters face conflict in the story that they resolve in meaningful ways.

The true significance in a story is in the quality of the telling, not in the elevated style of the prose.

For good storytelling, stories must be structured to provide continuous and total enjoyment to the reader through unified character action. The reader must be compelled to go on.

C. Author’s attitudes: fine-tuning

To reach maximum potential, authors of fiction must discover who they are and why they write. In many ways, the telling of fictional stories is a performance that can be damaged or destroyed by ill-conceived attitudes about writing.
CORE QUESTIONS

Do I write to master the skills and concepts of writing as an art form (or do I write stories to explain experienced emotions)?

Great stories are dramatically constructed art forms—a sculpture in words—that produce enlightened change in characters and readers. Stories are not beautiful descriptions of abstractions lived, such as love, hate, revenge or jealousy. And stories are not created to purge the author of an emotional or intellectual crisis.

Do I strive to tell a creative fictional story based on imagination (or am I writing a memoir or biography)?

The memoir is a popular and legitimate form of writing. But writing a memoir requires skills that often conflict with imaginative fiction. Adherence to the truth of what happened and the belief that a story based on a true story is equal or superior to the created fictional story, are destructive attitudes for the fiction writer. Most great stories are not just told from life; great stories are ideas (that may be stimulated by life) successfully expressed by creating dramatic (and significant) series of fictional events.

Do I write for creative excellence (or for fame)?

All authors want recognition for their work. But that recognition should be for writing stories that entertain and enlighten. Desire for fame as an author that comes from marketing and self-promotion imposes restrictions on creation of a great story. Writing a story is a selfless process, and above all, poor writing should not be promoted to the uninformed as worthy.

Do I write to provide meaning through entertainment and enlightenment (or to persuade to some presumption)?

To persuade a reader to a preset opinion does not support the creation of a great story. Authors enlighten about human nature; essayists, editorialists, and columnists persuade readers to opinions. Fiction authors who insert unrelated opinion in their stories face the danger of propaganda (deceptive or distorted information often about policy, ideas, doctrines or causes).

Do I rewrite to improve my creative story skills (or do I revise to transform my prose into obscure text with an intellectually intense meaning)?

Stories fail because of ineffective characterization or incredible conflicts and actions. Stories rarely fail because the prose is not fancy enough. Yet most authors revise through prose adjustment in style and craft when valuable revision really comes from structural adjustment, clarity of intent and idea change.
Do I believe stories are dramatic events for a reader to experience (or written words for the reader to interpret)?

Fictional stories entertain and enlighten through drama; drama is conflict, action, and resolution. Readers do not simply observe the story; they become involved in it. The writer’s challenge is to engage the reader from story beginning to story end, not to describe events. Successful writers actually provide only enough information on the page to stimulate the story in the reader’s mind. It is one of the wonders of reading great fictional stories that the story interpretation is unique to each reader, based on that reader’s intelligence, experience and creativity.

Do I believe stories are structures whose unity is discovered as reading progresses (or that they are meandering observations described step by step)?

Authors who start a character on a plot line to see what their characters will do have limited themselves for creating a story. Stories are carefully constructed, and then present details that are chosen to create images and ideas in the minds of the reader. Details are not chosen just to record them. Stories can be thought of as jigsaw puzzles where the author supplies essential, clearly detailed pieces that are complete, accurate, interesting and dramatic, and the reader fills in the rest.

Authors who insist that a nonstructured way is best for them—and then prefer to write rather than structure-and-write—miss the potential of reader enjoyment that is made possible by a well-constructed fictional story.

Proper attitude is essential: Write a story as a unit, not as loosely associated ideas discovered moment by moment.

Part I

Structuring the Story

A. Know the story before writing

1) Conflict

An author is not simply presenting scenes and events by describing an imagined reality. Authors create stories by imagining characters and what they do in a story in a dramatic way. Historically, drama requires conflict, action and resolution, and drama provides the essence of literary fiction. The conflict can be physical, mental or emotional. The action is presented by placing the reader in the scene or by narrative telling, and resolution involves a change in the character, either a reversal of some thought or trait in the character or the character’s recognition of something not understood before. It is in drama that the reader becomes involved and where, through the actions of the characters, readers sympathize with the characters.
2) **Change and discovery**

An effective story is a dramatic unit made of dramatic parts (scenes). It is in well-constructed scenes that characters with strong desires face significant conflicts. As the story progresses, the character’s action and resolution of the conflicts bring a change in how the character thinks. In the best stories, the reader’s thinking is changed (reversal) or he or she discovers something (recognition) by the logical progression of characters through scenes.

3) **Achieving goals**

A goal for the story is essential. When authors clearly know what they want to achieve with a story, writing is more targeted for the reader’s understanding and readers enjoy the story more. The goal may change many times during the writing of a story. That is part of the healthy process of writing.

4) **Instilling creativity**

As previously noted, many authors reject structuring their stories before writing, arguing that discovering the story line as they progress is the best way to stimulate their creative processes. But use of structure does not diminish creativity. In fact, thinking of the structure of the story before and during writing creates alternatives that can contribute significant, believable events to the story.

5) **Realistic approach to writing**

The challenge is to find the story, imagine it in images and scenes, and then write. Remember: Great stories are not found by wandering through the writing process describing event after event as it comes to mind and commenting on how characters feel.

6) **Avoid elevated prose**

Failure to structure is almost always replaced by ineffectively elevating the prose. Elevated prose downplays action and drama as the source of reader satisfaction and involvement.

    *In essence, in great stories, prose is not the endpoint.*

**B. Outline**

An outline is a list of main-point story elements that organizes scenes; establishes timelines; tracks characters; superimposes emotional arcs in the story; embeds conflict; and includes whatever else may improve a story by logical, dramatic presentation. Outlines may be entirely a mental process, but a written outline is a valuable tool for authors to use. An outline helps authors to understand and to reflect on the story being told.

A story is a series of well-defined fragments. The quality of these fragments, for the reader, is improved if the fragment is developed within the context of the overall story, and not as an isolated story event or idea. Every element created affects every other element. As elements come together, theme and meaning emerge from the story. An outline helps achieve coherence in the writing.
**Principles**-outline

* Emotions, images, drama, time, and character-driven plot are all elements kept in mind when forming an outline.
* Stories are all elements working together as if they were not elements.
* Structure makes elements more effective.
* Elements in outline help identify the beginnings of meaning and theme.

**Guidelines**-outline

1) Test yourself: Can you tell a summary of the story verbally without notes?
2) Do you know when a story will start and end, and all that happens in between, before you write?
3) What is the major conflict of the story? (In a novel there may be many.) What is the action precipitated by this conflict, what is the resolution of the conflict? Are you clear what the resolution is (even if you expect it to change as the story develops)?

**C. Creating Scenes**

Scenes are dramatic units that make up a story. As sentences are to paragraphs, scenes are to stories: They are the building blocks that contribute to the theme and action of the entire story.

1) **Conflict/action/resolution**

   **Conflict** is the basis of a scene. Conflict is best developed between two or three (or more) characters; it is rare for a single-character scene to provide deep and intense conflict for the reader to become involved in. Conflicts can be physical, emotional, mental or verbal.

   **Action** presents how characters respond to conflict. How characters act in scenes reveals the characters’ personalities so the reader develops respect and sympathy for characters.

   **Resolution** of scene action tells the reader how the character was changed by the action.

2) **In-scene and narrative telling of conflicts**

   In-scene development captures the reader’s interest and provides maximum enjoyment. Yet in-scene development requires more time to read and more space on the page. Therefore, narrative telling of scene conflict is useful in transitions and when time for in-scene development does not allow for smooth forward progress of the story. Most great stories have more in-scene development than narrative telling (see Example 1).
Example 1: Narrative vs. In-scene

Narrative telling. *(Quick, effective.)*

The ship sank.

In-scene showing. *(More story time, more engaging.)*

The ocean liner listed, taking on water through the hole the torpedo made in her portside. The bridge shuddered from two explosions in the engine room, and as the crew struggled to release the lifeboats, the bow disappeared beneath the surface first, soon followed by the hull.

D. Establishing time

Every reader needs orientation in time as the measure of existence—birth to death for humans, from start to finish for anything. Stories describe what happened in the way humans experience time, but almost all stories are told in a shorter time than the story would take if lived. Therefore, the stories are condensed (and parts are left out). Scenes, paragraphs, dialogue—all time-related elements—are altered from real-time progression.

*Story time.*

Story time is almost always chronological from start to finish. Readers must know when the story takes place—date, time.

Flashbacks (back story) happen before the start of the story. When flashbacks are multiple and/or extended, story time can be confused for the reader. Flashbacks should be used sparingly.

*Character time.*

Each character has a life lived, so that readers need to know characters’ ages. Age gives clues about the characters’ mental, emotional and physical states—and since characters speak differently throughout their lives, age helps establish an effective, consistent and realistic voice for each character.

In addition, each character uses chronologic story time that must be proportional to the character’s importance in the story and in relation to other characters.

*Narrator time.*

Narrators relate stories from a certain time in their imagined lives. The narrator time, for best distancing and maximum effect, should be different than author time. The author creates in 2007 a story that is set in 1961. The narrator might relate the story from his or her present in 1972. The author does not need to state these relationships, but they should be well established in mind. Authors should at least think of these relationships for best dramatic effect and accurate characterization.
**Reader time.**

How long will the reader spend with the story, and is the time spent a reasonable amount for the story being told? A detailed epic rarely works in short fiction, and a second in a protagonist’s lifetime can rarely be drawn out into a novel without losing reader interest.

**Time logic.**

All the aspects of time in a story must be logical in sequence so that cause and effect is believable. For barebones examples, a happening in 1994 cannot cause something to happen in 1993, or a character cannot fly an airplane that wasn’t invented at the time of the story.

**Author time.**

Authors should allow sufficient time for story creation to make the story the best possible. Deadlines suppress great story creation.

**Time condensation—narrative bridge**

At times, detailed logical explanations will not fit into the storytelling. Narrative bridges can be used to avoid logical explanations. For example, you might have a character in a story who goes from point A to point B. Story time elapsed is six hours. The character might take a plane or go in an uninterrupted car trip at eighty miles per hour. But the character doesn’t have her own car or enough money for a plane. Rather than work out the details of the character’s solving the problem (assume it isn’t important to the story), the reader will often accept a brief narrative summary of the fact that character went from A to B. “Hester was determined to meet Harry in New York and she made the trip in six hours,” might be used rather than showing her movement by plane or car and having to solve the credibility problems of how she paid for it.

**Tense and time**

All stories have happened. Even stories set in the future have happened in the author’s mind. This is true of present tense stories, too. Present tense is a useful device for invoking a sense of immediacy in a story that has already happened.

There is a certain artificiality to present tense in a story, and readers will vary widely in their acceptance of stories told entirely in present tense. Present tense usage can also create an awkward orientation for the reader in time, including difficult transitions in and out of flashbacks. It can also create doubt about the narrator and character’s perspectives and authority on story action.

**In the moment**

When writing in the moment, the reader is provided information filtered for the illusion of being in the time and place of the happening. This is not related to tense, and either past or present can be used. In the moment relies on detail, adherence to minute description of the action in logical sequence, and time movement that approximates the pulse of real life. For example: He struck the wooden match against the side of the matchbox in the dark, directed by habit.
The glow from the flame illuminated the four-foot fuse. He placed the match to the fuse-end; the spark sputtered, and then the tight flame progressed with steady acceleration toward the bag that held the explosives.

E. Setting

Each story has a physical environment. How broad the choice for environment is affects the way the story is told. A story in New York may require different development than a story in Peoria, because each setting is different and each has a different effect on characters and character action. Setting will influence the voice of the characters and the narrator.

**Principles**-setting

* Carefully chosen settings allow opportunities for character and plot development—Mississippi in the 1960s carries the energies of racial strife, for example.
* Excessive use of setting can detract from the momentum of a story and prohibit reader involvement.
* Authors should be familiar with settings but should not choose romantic or exciting settings that do not contribute to the story. Never let travel-folder, awe-filled writing slip into the prose.

**Guideline**-setting

Settings are often emphasized by narrative description. Because narration is easier to write, for most authors, than other elements of fiction, there is a danger of over-describing setting with too much detail and too many adjectives and similes. Be sure every detail of the setting does not just create an image of where the action is occurring, but that it contributes to plot elements and augments character development as well.

F. Characterization

Characters populate stories and are developed through the accumulation of limited and carefully chosen facts and actions that interact with the reader’s imagination to fill in gaps of characterization not directly provided. A delicate balance must be sought in order to provide enough information to allow the reader to know the character, yet enough room must be left open in the characterization for the reader to add their own imaginative details to complete their understanding of the character.

Every major character must have a serious desire (a strong want or need). These desires must be clear to the reader and related to the movement and theme of the story. When presenting character desires at a point in the story, to be effective the author must ask what the character knows at this point, and what the reader knows. The reader should always know more.
How characters come alive.

* Need for surprise.

In storytelling, authors need to structure a story so that every happening is a surprise for the reader, but the surprise must make the reader feel they anticipated the surprise all along (even though they didn’t think about it). Readers cannot be manipulated. Readers must feel led, never forced, and led only to the point at which they can make their own discovery. All this is achieved by believable in-depth characterization, and by meticulous logic in the cause and effect of plot development. It is this difficult-to-achieve edge that makes the literary fictional story so special—and so difficult to write.

* Avoiding stereotypes for characters.

Readers subconsciously begin to group characters in knowable boxes based on their life experiences—good or bad, likable or unlikable, smart or dumb, or moral or immoral. Unless the author provides sufficient characterization, readers will begin to pigeonhole characters, and the characters will become clichés. These stereotypical judgments are prevented or adjusted by the author’s ability to create a unique, in-depth, acceptable character. When the author fails in character details, the reader’s stereotyping works against the success of the story.

*Internal Reflection.

Internal reflection is a special attribute to the written story. The reader knows what a character thinks and feels. Internal reflection is a powerful storytelling technique if it supports the story. But it tends to be overused at the expense of character action, primarily because it is a way for the author—through the character—to say things important to him or her (the author) that are tangential or unrelated to story movement and theme.

How characters become credible.

* Acceptable responses.

As authors do their work well, a reader takes on a certain possession of the character. The character in any story starts out with unlimited options on things to do and say. But as the story progresses, these options narrow. The reader enjoying the story will not be aware of decreasing options, but he or she will be disturbed if the character does or says something that isn’t what the reader would reasonably expect at that time in the story, and the reader’s acceptance and caring for the character is diminished. If inappropriate character responses happen too often, the reader rejects the character and the story.

For example, Joe is a character who acts. Readers want to feel that they weren’t exactly expecting Joe to do (or say) that, but now that he has, they can see exactly where he is coming from. Joe is “in character.” His character. The reader does not want to disbelieve Joe’s character.

Joe is out of his character. He would never do (say) that. Not the Joe I know.
By the end of the story, the author has brought the reader to impact, and character actions and dialogue will have few if any options. The character is so well formed, so deeply engrained in the reader, that the important late happenings—so crucial for meaning—must be reasonable for the character, even though the reader might not have anticipated them.

*Feelings.*

Feeling, or emotion, is the prime tool of fiction. So expression of feelings is a key skill for the writer. The paradox is that erroneous expression of feelings can lead to sentimentality, and, at worst, rejection of the story.

Feelings in a story can be told. “He was angry with her and told her so in a loud voice.”

Although necessary at times, this telling of emotions tires the reader rapidly. It lacks energy. But the author can show feeling through action and dialogue, although it is much more strenuous and time consuming for the author. For example, “You are the worst degenerate I’ve ever known.” The dialogue here seems angry and hints that the anger is over a morality issue—interesting!

Feelings, too, must be toned to the character and the moment. Even slight inappropriateness will erode the reader’s trust in the author to tell a good story.

For most effective expression of feelings, abstractions such as love, anger, pity or hate should be used with caution, and the emotion the character experiences should be expressed with concrete words and actions. For example, what do characters in love do? They have funny sensations under their sternums, they have more awareness of their heart-actions, their minds get clouded with details of the persons they love and they can’t think about usual things. In essence, there is more impact to know love through actions--and words—that in naming the emotion. This is difficult to do because the descriptions of people in love are limited, and an author is always bordering on cliché. But the work to find the fresh descriptions right for the story is well worth the quality it provides for character development and plot vitality.

Every author must develop his or her own sensibilities about when feelings help the story. Character feelings are integrated with plot action in tasteful ways, and choices should be made that suit the reader who is best suited to enjoy the story. This is not just style-varnish; this is the essence of good writing.

**Principles-characterization**

* Characters are developed by action and reaction, dialogue, internal reflection, rhetorical question, emotions, diction (choice of words and context), narrative, exposition, integration with setting and description of scene, author’s familiarity with the character’s story line, back story, and other techniques unique to specific authors and particular stories.
* Desires must be internally powerful in order to force unavoidable action.
* Actions should convey character emotion for maximum effect.
* Throughout the story, characterization must be continuously and seamlessly layered on, and must be true, interesting and dynamic.
* Characters must be in conflict.
* One-character scenes are rarely, if ever, effective.
* As the character becomes stronger to the reader through detail and familiarity, the character’s options for action and dialogue become fewer. Therefore, every author seeks good characterization for strong, inevitable motivation of characters.

**Guidelines—characterization**

1) Be careful to show the character’s desires, not to tell the desires, which is easier.
2) Be sure not to doom characters; they must have possibility to choose.
3) As characters move through a story, don’t forget someone introduced earlier. Ask who hasn’t been heard from for a while. Don’t lose characters.
4) Although it is essential to use the point of view of a character for development, remember that too much access to one character’s point of view can be deadening.
5) Remember that a character from life who is described with adherence to reality is limited in the dynamic, unique, fictional character development necessary in the best literary fiction.
6) Check character development by studying a unified overview of all actions and dialog of the character in the story. Be sure that words and actions are driven by motivations that are right for the time in the character’s development and are reasonable for the exact moment in the story. This is one of the most difficult skills to develop as a fiction writer, but it is the key to developing an identity as an author.
7) Be aware of inappropriate responses in dialog among multiple characters—especially of words, syntax, and ideation. Each character’s response must fit the immediate range of emotions of all the characters at that story moment. When character responses are right, setting, other characters’ feelings, reader enjoyment and acceptance, and even basic momentum of the story are enhanced.

G. Plot

In general, plot may be thought of as everything that happens in the story. But in literary fiction, characterization is the main element of plot; it is the inner story of characters that moves the outer story of plot action. Easy to say but difficult to do, mainly because making the character’s inner story believable, yet unique and forceful, takes skill and practice.

Common plot types in genre fiction (for example, search, revenge, rivalry, quest, mystery and others) do not require development of characters to the same emotional level needed in literary stories. This helps make literary stories unique where characters’ thoughts, emotions and actions generate the plot. In genre plots with predetermined action, the characters often act without regard to inner conflicts, and the plots are fatalistic and dependent on coincidence.
1) Basic plot structure: beginning, middle, end

a. Beginning

A beginning is that point in a story from which everything follows. Nonadherence to this major concept is a common misstep by an author. In essence, don’t leap back in time to the past to start a story. Strive for unity that doesn’t jerk the reader back and forth in time.

**Principles-beginning**

* The first sentence must be interesting.
* Always try to introduce major characters first, or early, in the work.
* Authors should begin with as much knowledge of where the story is going as possible; readers need a sense of story destination.
* Exceptions are published, but in general, stories should: (1) never start with a flashback, and (2) never start with the past perfect tense (he had plastered himself and his motorcycle against a brick wall) or (3) a negation (Billie could never climb the play gym as well as Suzie).
* Dialogue essential to the reader can provide effective characterization, but does not easily set the place, tone, and direction of a story. Avoid using dialogue to start a story.

b. Middle

This is the arc of the story, where it is essential to stay on the story track.

**Guidelines-middle**

1) Avoid temptations to wander in writing scenes and don’t slip in ideas not important to the story.
2) Be sure character emotional and action progression is smooth and logical.
3) Keep looking for the theme.
4) Don’t use extraneous detail.
5) Don’t fall into excessive narrative description of your story.
6) Stay in the scene wherever possible to maintain drama and a sense of movement.

c. End

An ending is the point after which nothing else of significance happens in the story.

**Principles-ending**

* Endings must have elements of surprise, yet must not be too surprising. An ending should be reasonable, yet not too predictable. An ending should
not be too devastating or too redemptive, but should have some recognizable—and memorable—change in one or more major characters.  
* Stories must not fall apart at the end; an author should direct the reader’s feelings. Readers should discover something new and unique to them. Therefore, for maximum impact, endings should show emotional and intellectual awakenings and reversals, not tell them.  
* Resolutions must be clear in order to satisfy the reader, and they must be directly tied to the conflict and be a result of the action.  
* Avoid trying to evoke emotion in a reader by telling a character’s state of mind through clichés and sentimental images; the drama and action of the story should be used to provide the reader with a meaningful emotional response (see Example 2).  

Example 2. Ineffective ending (with clichés and sentimentality).  

With a heavy heart, he sat on the carcass of his dead horse, the weight of the world light compared to his grief, a grief that would only grow with time. True friendships can never be replaced.

2) Transitions

The art of transition is essential to good storytelling. In film, the story goes from scene to scene and the visual orientation to time of day and place is immediate. In literary fiction, however, the reader must be oriented to each scene—who, what, when, where—by transitions. Transitions must tell the reader how much story time has transpired, and transitions must be logical, accurate and factual. Transitions lead the reader from one time to another, from place to place, and from emotion to emotion. Line spaces in formatting (and with markings for section or chapter breaks) are also used for transition, but these breaks should be carefully chosen and not replace the well-written transition that is needed to enhance the story and the reader’s understanding.

Guidelines—transitions

1) Tell the reader who or what is in the transition, when it occurs, and/or where it happens.  
2) Do not try to create suspense by using personal pronouns—he, she, or they—without a clear and juxtaposed antecedent. Use “John drove . . .” rather than “He drove . . .” whenever it is appropriate.  
3) Transitions usually condense action or description; be careful to include only the most important information in the transition. Transitions, by design, must be succinct.

3) Drama

Drama is conflict with a resultant reaction and an eventual resolution. Drama is the essence of a good story. Yet drama is more difficult for a writer of prose than for a dramatist or screenwriter, because the writer is restricted to the written word and cannot
rely on visual and auditory stimuli. But overcoming the difficulties is rewarding for the writer, because the intensity of the written word between author and reader can uniquely give powerful and memorable stories rarely achievable in film or stage drama.

Conflicts can be multiple or single, simple or complex; they may be person against any of the following: person, family, self, reality, friend, enemy, environment, values, morality, lust, authority, and others.

Action is best shown in-scene with occasional narrative summary for condensed action.

4) Desire and motivation

Characters must have strong desires (more than just needs) that motivate them to make significant changes. This strong desire must be explored as the story develops. With story development, careful narrowing (and concentrating) of the characters’ desires strengthens the logic and acceptance of what happens in the story and to the character at every level.

Writers almost always discover that the first and second desires they discern for a character are weak clichés. This occurs because the desires are not thought out enough or targeted accurately. Only after digging deeply into the story, and only after layers of characterization have been created, can the perfect desire of a character be discovered.

5) Inner (emotional) and outer (action) plots

Principles-plot

Emotional (inner) story
* The plot line is dependent on good characterization. It represents the emotional flow of the characters. It generates and explains motives.
* All thoughts and emotions should be reasonable to the character’s life, education and intelligence. Errors will reduce the emotional impact and believability of the character.

Action (outer story)
* The outer story is dependent on conflict, action, and resolution. It should be logical and have evidence of clear cause and effect. Careful choice of in-scene or narrative telling is crucial for good storytelling.

H. Dialogue

Dialogue in fiction is not the way people speak in real life. Transcribed speech tends to be flat and boring. Dialogue in fiction must meet its responsibility to the storytelling, must be interesting, and must serve multiple purposes. These purposes include exposition (description of basic facts), time orientation, scene placement, sensory perceptions, emotional states, conflict, characterization (how a character speaks, thinks, or feels), plot advancement, theme support, enlightenment (of character and reader), and others that authors discover as they write that are specific to each new story (see Example 3 and Example 4).
Fiction dialogue must meet readers’ expectations; dialogue must also be appropriate for the story style and individual characters’ personalities, and the dialogue must seem real in their world.

Example 3. Failed dialogue: NOT GOOD.

“Is that a bear?” Joe asked.
“Where?” Sam said.
“Over there.”
“Damn. I think it is a bear.”
“What are we going to do?”
“I don’t know.”

Example 4. BETTER. Elements of surprise and action.

The bear reared back on its hind legs, roaring.
“Don’t move!” said Joe.
“I’m going to throw up.” Sam said.
“He’s seen us.”
“I dropped my rifle.”
“Start making noise. Maybe we can scare him.”

The reading of the dialogue may take longer than the story action would require. The reader senses this discrepancy, and although the discrepancy may not be identified, it may result in the feeling of inferior writing and storytelling.

But great dialogue can add a physical rhythm to the reading, provide a rich field for fictional voice development, show unique character thought patterns, and provide scene motion.

Characters speaking in fiction must say only what they can reasonably be expected to think and formulate. Thoughts, feelings, opinions or desires of the author must not come through character dialogue. Although you can easily find examples of authorial intrusion in many famous and published authors, it is rarely effective in present-day storytelling. Authorial intrusions weaken the character, break the reader’s involvement in the story, and rarely contribute to the story line, theme or development. This does not mean a narrator’s prevailing presence is not always in the story, or that narrator’s point of view is not useful. It is only jolting, unrelated or tangential ideas or speech inappropriate for the character and interjected into the flow of the story that must be avoided.

Principles - dialogue

* Dialogue should never be written to fill in or to replace essential facts or transitions.
* Each dialogue segment should have multiple purposes.
* Dialogue should present essential information for the story.
* Dialogue should be spoken by the most effective character for the immediate part of the story.
* Modern dialogue is not effective as soliloquy, or sermon, or exposition of fact.
* Dialogue must be in a consistent voice.
* Dialogue is used to break up narrative passages, but dialogue as boredom prevention is not effective.

**Guidelines**

1) To improve dialogue, ask what is the purpose of it. Does the dialogue advance the story? Does dialogue carry the action? Is an important tone established? Does dialogue orient the reader? Does dialogue contribute to characterization?

2) Dialogue must not sound like actors in a stage play. Actors have different rules. Their speech has different rhythms and is more restricted.

3) Dialogue must be constructed with attention to rhythmic effects that should be consistent with narrative and should contribute to the reader’s process of reading the story. Excessive short dialogue between characters may give an unwanted and deadly rhythmic effect.

4) In effective dialogue, a character’s question or idea should rarely be answered directly.

5) Modifiers used in attribution of dialogue should be tasteful. Avoid “I love you,” he humorously chortled.