



IT'S ALL ABOUT STORY

Thoughts on Story Structure

Revised Edition 2015

by

Dale Griffiths Stamos

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: AT THE HEART IS CRAFT	2
PART ONE:	
PREWRITING	
DON'T RUSH TO THE PAGE OR: THE IMPORTANCE OF PREWRITING	5
THE FIVE QUESTIONS	6
WHAT'S IN A PREMISE?	9
GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CHARACTERS	11
THE STORY BOARD	13
PART TWO:	
FIRST DRAFT	
SAY WHAT? THE ART OF DIALOGUE	16
MAKING A SCENE 1: 5 W'S AND AN H	18
MAKING A SCENE 2: THE BEAT GOES ON	20
CONFLICT: THE ART OF NOT PLAYING NICE	21
THREE ACT STRUCTURE: BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND END	23
CHARACTER: AN ARC IS AN ARC	25
RISING ACTION	27
REDISCOVERING PREMISE	29
CRISIS, CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION	30
PART THREE:	
REWRITING	
THE FIRST PASS	33
PLOT + CHARACTER = STORY	35
EXPOSING YOUR EXPOSITION	37
FINE TUNING	38
APPENDIXES:	
APPENDIX A: TWO EXAMPLES OF THE FIVE QUESTIONS	42
APPENDIX B: RECOMMENDED BOOKS	43

Introduction: At the Heart Is Craft

To be a writer, like any other kind of artist, is to be addicted to your art. It is also to be a soul excavator, to be a little crazy, to stare the odds in the face and persist anyway, but more than anything, it's to put in the work. The hard, steady, often inspired, but also intensely *thought-out* process of crafting a story from beginning to end.

I use the word “craft” purposefully. Writing, to be most effective, does not just come from rich description, strong dialogue, or compelling themes, no matter how well expressed. All of these elements must be placed within a dramatic story structure driven by powerful internal and external forces of desire and opposition that drive the story to an inevitable conclusion. Making the elements come together in just the right way is not easy, but it is your job as a writer to make it look easy. Your reader or audience will be so absorbed in the story, all the structure and technique you use to tell your tale will fall away like so much invisible scaffolding. But make no mistake, without that scaffolding, you have no story.

I hope, as we go along, to show you that craft is not a dry intellectual process. Instead it is a living evolving transliteration of ideas, emotions, and deep-felt truths into powerful dramatic form. It is the use of story technique, which has been around since the beginning of time, to touch the universal in all of us.

I will be dividing this booklet into sections on Prewriting, Writing, and Rewriting. I will cover such topics as: Premise, Character Arcs, Rising Action, Exposition, and guidelines for Rewriting.

Join me on the journey...

PART ONE

PREWRITING

Don't Rush to the Page or: The Importance of Prewriting

Prewriting constitutes everything you do before you start to “actually” write your book, play or screenplay. Many inexperienced writers begin right off with trying to write the story itself, not realizing that, like the tip of the proverbial iceberg, the written piece is just what lies above a deep, unseen level that keeps the visible story afloat.

Prewriting is a process of inspiration, exploration, story structuring, and character formation. It is an interplay between your right and left brain, a dance of questions you ask yourself and different paths you try out and discard until the story emerges in a strong and viable form. To indulge in yet another metaphor, prewriting is where you allow your story to gestate before being birthed onto the page. Once on that page, it will “grow” through various drafts. But the prewriting stage is every bit as important, or perhaps even more important than any of those drafts. Because it is there the story will take on its DNA, the core features that will guide you through the demanding process ahead. Without those elements, when you encounter roadblocks along your drafting path, (and you will), randomness is likely to take over, or confusion, or the urge to just throw everything out and start over again. But if you have done your prewriting properly, the driving forces of character and story will hold firm through any challenge.

When I prewrite, I start with a notebook that is specifically designated for this stage. I ponder aspects of my story in an open-ended, unedited process I call *filling the pages*. I ask myself all sorts of “what if” questions, and allow whatever answers that come to flow onto the page. I write character bios and monologues and scraps of dialogue if I hear them. These are “musings” no one else but I will see, so I am free to explore in any direction I want. If I hit dead ends, no problem, I go off in another direction and see where that takes me. This is the place to do that. Better here than in draft #3! There are two advantages to working with a notebook like this. First, by not just thinking about, but *writing out* exploratory thoughts it allows the writer self to be engaged, and thus calms the impatience to get to the story itself. Second, there is a strange phenomenon that happens on the page that all working writers know. Writing begets writing. In other words, just the act of putting something down in words seems to trigger more words - and thus more ideas, possibilities, and insights. Filling the notebook is, in other words, one of the ways to open the floodgates to inspiration, to invite in the thoughts *below* the thoughts – the ones you didn't even know you were thinking.

The Five Questions

Early in the prewriting stage, you should ask yourself five questions:

- Who is the story about? In other words, who is the protagonist?
- What does the protagonist want or need? (consciously and/or unconsciously)
- What gets in the protagonist's way? (antagonistic forces)
- Does the protagonist succeed or fail? (resolution)
- How does the protagonist change?

Let's take each of these in turn:

Who is it about?

Who your story is about, your *protagonist*, is the character with whom the audience most engages and whose problem they want most to see resolved. This does not mean the other characters won't be fully developed, with problems and conflicts of their own, but having a central character is what helps *focus* the story both for author and reader. Think of that character as the *voice* of the story. Your protagonist, can be one person or more than one person. You could have group protagonist, for example people in a lifeboat fighting to survive. Or a couple who are fighting odds to be together. (Most romances have this structure). Or you could have a multiple viewpoint novel (with each acting as a protagonist.) An example of this are the four mothers and daughters and their separate story lines in ***The Joy Luck Club*** by Amy Tan. In ***Ordinary People*** you have two protagonists that alternate telling their story: Conrad and his father, Calvin.

What does the protagonist want?

The protagonist must have a compelling need that drives him or her throughout the story. This need is usually established by an *inciting incident* at the beginning of the piece. The inciting incident is an event that throws the character out of his or her status quo condition by introducing a *problem*. It is the protagonist's need to resolve this problem that drives the action forward. The incident in ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*** by Ken Kesey is, of course when McMurphy gets brought to the psychiatric hospital. Thus starts his battle with the institutional Nurse Ratchet. The inciting incident in ***The Kite Runner*** is when the main character, Amir, betrays his servant and friend, Hassan. This sends him on a path of guilt and the need to seek redemption.

Examples of compelling needs: In ***Of Mice and Men***, the protagonist, George, needs to protect the mentally handicapped Lennie. In ***Death of a Salesman***, Willy Loman has an intense inner need for self acceptance and a justification for his life. He seeks this through worldly success – and if he can't get it for himself, then he'll try to get it for his sons. In the memoir, ***The Glass***

Castle, the author, Jeannette Walls need to understand and forgive her parents for an unpredictable and often abusive upbringing. Blanche DuBois in *Streetcar Named Desire* wants a refuge from reality and the choices she has made in life. She will proceed to seek that refuge in ways that will ultimately destroy her

The compelling need, by the way, even if it appears small, MATTERS enormously to the protagonist. Think of the DeSica 1948 film, *The Bicycle Thief* where the desperate search for a stolen bicycle means everything to the main character. With a group protagonist, they all share the same desire/need. You can also have a subplot in your story, in which case, it has its own protagonist with his or her own driving need.

The protagonist's need can either be external or internal, conscious or unconscious. Often there is both a conscious need and an unconscious one need operating within the protagonist. In this case, one need is often resolved at the expense of the other.

This need or desire is the *overarching* need. In other words, it travels the whole book. However in each scene of the book, characters will have specific needs to that scene. But those needs will still contribute to the overarching need. In *Ordinary People*, for example, the son, Conrad's overarching need is for healing and self forgiveness. But each scene may have its own need. For example, in the first chapter his need is to just "act normal" and not get noticed.

What is in the protagonist's way?

The obstacles in the protagonist's path are called antagonistic forces. These can be a person or persons, a situation, the protagonist's own inner conflict, an institution, society, even the weather! The most important thing to remember about antagonistic forces is they have to equal the effort and will put forth by the protagonist, otherwise not enough energy is generated in the piece. It is also important to remember an antagonist is not always a "bad guy" but simply what thwarts the character's want or need. You can write interesting, nuanced stories where your protagonist and antagonist have equally compelling actions and motivations. But again, your protagonist is the one we are the most "invested" in.

McMurphy's antagonist is Nurse Ratchett, but also the unyielding power of institutions. Blanche duBois's main obstacle is Stanley Kowalski. But she is also sabotaging herself in many ways, and so has equally strong inner obstacles - her need to be physically loved for example is in opposition with her need to be a delicate Southern flower. Jeannette Walls has both the antagonistic ways in which she was raised, but also the internal conflict of family loyalty and the need to forgive. Willy Loman has both internal obstacles (his self delusions) and external obstacles – his frustrations and failures with his sons, his work, etc.

Does the protagonist succeed or fail?

A question is posed when a story begins: Will the boy get the girl? Will the man gain fame and fortune? Will the woman overcome her prejudices? By the end of the story, in the *resolution*, you must answer the question with a Yes *or* with a No. Protagonists do not have to succeed for the story to resolve. Sometimes it is a tragic or unhappy ending. Jay Gatsby does not succeed in getting Daisy, and is killed at the end. In both *Streetcar* and *Death of a Salesman*, they fail, and death and lunacy are the results. Other times, the ending is such that the protagonist gains something by not getting what they want (a realization, a moral lesson learned, etc.)

How does the protagonist change?

An essential element of story is that the protagonist, by the end of the piece, changes or evolves in some way. Think of story as a crucible. Like metal transforms under the application of high heat, so the protagonist transforms through the challenges and obstacles s/he faces in struggling to resolve his or her problem. Depending on the story, this transformation can be subtle or dramatic, but it must be there.

By the end, Scout, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is a more mature but less idealistic young girl. Conrad, in *Ordinary People*, has accepted he is not to blame for his brother's death, and can now move forward. Blanche DuBois has tipped from a fragile self deluded state into full out insanity. Willy Loman has moved from disorientation to suicide. Nick Carraway, in *The Great Gatsby*, has learned that all is not gold that shines

Although many of these five questions will, of course, evolve during the drafting of your work, mapping them out in the prewriting phase helps you establish your story's *bone structure*, which will guide you through the entire writing process.

For a more thorough breakdown of the five questions as expressed in the two books: **To Kill a Mockingbird and **The Great Gatsby**, see Appendix A.*

What's In a Premise?

Determining the dramatic premise for your work is an essential task in the prewriting process.

Let me recommend the following excellent books that discuss the issue of premise in depth: *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri (considered by many the seminal book on playwriting structure), *How to Write a Damn Good Novel – Volumes I and II*, by James N. Frey, and *The Playwright's Process* by Buzz McLaughlin (this will not be the only time I recommend this superior book on all aspects of playwriting - which is also a helpful tool for other genres.)

So, what is premise?? A dramatic premise is a one sentence distillation of what your story is about. Egri states that it contains three C's: "character, conflict and conclusion." It is an active sentence, implying dramatic progression, i.e., a character struggles to resolve a dilemma and ends up in a different place than where s/he began. But keep in mind, it goes below the *events* of the story (This is a story about a young man, Joe who falls in love with Sue and gets his heart broken) and gets to the heart (and the author's vision) of the story (Young, foolish love leads to heartbreak.) James N. Frey describes it as: "A statement of what happens to the characters as a result of the core conflict of the story."

Premise generally has three parts: A set of character choices and circumstances, an active verb, and a result. Here are some examples:

Madame Bovary: Illicit love leads to death.

To Kill a Mockingbird: Learning to face reality leads to greater maturity

The Godfather: Family loyalty leads to a life of crime.

The Old Man and the Sea: Courage leads to redemption

The Great Gatsby: Obsessive love leads to disappointment and death

The Kite Runner: Great guilt leads to atonement

Macbeth: Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction.

Death of a Salesman: Looking for fulfillment in worldly success leads to disillusionment.

Days of Wine and Roses: Alcoholism destroys love.

Notice that often the verbal phrase: "leads to" is used to link parts one and three of the premise. That is because "leads to" always implies movement. But other strong verbs like "destroys," "conquers," "defies," and "defeats" can be equally effective.

Also notice that premise is *not*, per se, a universal statement. It is instead, a statement of the “truth” of the particular world of the story. Unlike morals (“Greed is selfish,” “Love conquers all,” “Adultery is wrong.”) premise presents the direct consequences of the actions of your characters in the world view *you* as author choose to depict. In other words, in one premise, your main character may indeed “sow what he reaps.” But you could be telling a much more cynical story instead, in which the character gets away with his evil deeds. Think of Noah Cross in the movie, *Chinatown*: That premise might be: Power leads to getting away with crime. *You* establish the premise of your story. You decide with what slant you are telling your tale. Another way to look at it is, premise is a statement that in the fictional, subjective world of your story, you are trying to *prove*.

The difference between Premise and Theme is that theme is a motif or a number of motifs that run through your work. You may have themes such as religion (*Elmer Gantry*), moral behavior and racism (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), the failure of the American dream (*Death of a Salesman*), etc.

It is important to take the time in the prewriting phase to construct an effective premise. It will serve as your focal point as you begin writing. It will be the sentence you put on the wall that will remind you when you are or are not on track. Like all aspects of writing, it may change during the drafting process (at which point you make a new premise), but establishing now that one clear distillation of the heart of your story, will likely save much heartache later.

Getting to Know Your Characters

During the prewriting phase, Character Bios and Character Monologues are useful tools for fleshing out your characters and giving them dimensionality. Many books on writing have templates for character biographies. Two books I mentioned in my last chapter: *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri and *The Playwright's Process* by Buzz McLaughlin have excellent templates.

Here is a thumbnail of these templates. Keep in mind, there are three aspects of your character's life you will want to examine: the physical, the sociological and the psychological:

PHYSICAL: Describe what your character *looks* like: Are they tall/short, thin/fat, color of hair and eyes, salient facial features, hairstyle, any physical scars or handicaps, style of dress and comportment (graceful, clumsy) etc.

SOCIOLOGICAL: Describe your character's social life: married/unmarried, parents & siblings, any children, other important relatives, their education, job status, religious affiliation, clubs, sex life, romantic life, etc.

PSYCHOLOGICAL: Describe your character's psychological traits: are they shy/outgoing, honest/dishonest, neurotic, open, garrulous, annoying, nerdy, obsessive, bookish, a computer whiz, etc. What are their interests and passions? What is their basic philosophy of life? Attitude toward the opposite sex? How do they behave when all alone? When in the company of others? (Is it different?) Every character has some kind of flaw, what is theirs?

As you go through this process, you may realize that you don't necessarily know too many of these details about your character. That's all right. Think of these bios as a means to establish them now. It may feel, in a way, almost arbitrary, as if you're just making things up as you go along. But if you let your pen guide you, you will find that your character takes fuller and fuller shape in front of you. And remember, you are still in the prewriting phase, so that means all of this is essentially exploratory, a means to an end. You can change any aspect of the bios as you go forward. This is just to give you a jumping off place, a solid base from which your character can grow and evolve.

The use of Character Monologues can serve to get you even more deeply into character. In this case, you free associate a number of important moments in your characters life, using the first person. (Example: The day I broke my arm. The day my father walked out...). In *The Playwright's Process*, the author calls these "milestones." Fill a page with 20 or so of these. You then take 5-7 of them and write one page monologues (again in the character's *first person voice*) describing each incident in full, with all its emotional and dramatic content.

How much you will use these monologues in your story does not matter. Parts of some of them will likely crop up at key moments. But the important thing is how much these monologues allow you *inside* your character.

As effective as these two techniques can be, in the same way that description, no matter how detailed, can never really capture the essence of someone in your life, so your characters, in the end, will transcend these biographical details and start to live and breathe in your mind in more ineffable ways. Character Bios and Character Monologues are a doorway in to that deeper character essence, and they give you, in addition, a rich set of details you can tap into as needed when writing your piece.

The Story Board

At this stage of prewriting you've mapped out your story elements, determined your premise and gotten to know your characters through bios and first person monologues. You may also have jotted down ideas for scenes and bits of dialogue as they've come to you. All of this was part of the *filling the notebook* phase and, if you're like me, your notebook is pretty packed by now.

So it's time to move into the last phase of prewriting: your Story Board. This is a technique used by most screenwriters but one that is very useful to fiction and nonfiction writers as well.

All you need is a bulletin board and large index cards (5x8 work well). These index cards will contain a minimum of three key elements: Who is in the scene. Where the scene is taking place. And what the scene is about. Here's an example card:

Mark and Joann

Joann's apartment

Joann is breaking up with Mark

Try, when possible, to put an action verb in the sentence that describes what the scene is about. That verb will imply the movement of the scene. This is better, for example, than saying: Joann wants to break up with Mark. That is her inner desire. She may want to break up with him, but is doing everything to avoid it. So you want to establish what she is actively *doing* in the scene.

Although a card with these elements is all you need, you can also go a little further on the cards if you want. For example, you can break down the action *beats* of each scene. In this breakup scene for example you may have the following beats.

Joann is acting uncharacteristically irritable with Mark.

Mark tries to find out what's wrong, but Joann avoids answering.

Mark presses and Joann tells Mark of her decision to leave.

Mark does his best to persuade her to stay.

But Joann ends up walking out.

You may also find, as you're writing these scene cards, that dialogue comes to you, or a visual description, or interesting sub textual material. Jot these down on the back of the card, or on an additional card you can layer underneath the main one.

You will map out, in this way, as much of your story as you can. Then, you will put the cards up on the bulletin board in the order you think your scenes will happen. This is going to be a very flexible, fluid process. If you're not sure what happens between one scene and another, then leave a space in between. If after looking at your board you think your sixth scene would work better as, say, your third scene, then change the order. If deeper questions come up as you ponder your board, then you can always return to your notebook and work out those questions in a more open-ended manner. Feel free, throughout, to change any elements on your cards by crossing out or erasing; or by removing entire cards and/or adding new ones.

Essentially, you are looking to see if the flow of your scenes works dramatically. Notice where the story feels static, or where it doesn't further the premise (remember that all important premise!) You want the content and order of your scenes to create a growing feeling of tension that leads to an eventual (and inevitable) resolution.

In the end, like all the other elements of prewriting, story boarding is a tool – one that will help you move more smoothly into that important first draft.

PART TWO

FIRST DRAFT

Say What? The Art of Dialogue

Making your dialogue work is obviously essential when writing a play or screenplay because dialogue (and visuals) are your principal means of communicating character and story. But even for novels and memoirs, good dialogue is essential. When starting to write dialogue for your first draft, there are key elements you need to keep in mind:

Differentiating the Characters:

Although, like all writers, you will certainly have a style, you must work, nonetheless, within the world of your story to give each character their own separate voice. How a character speaks is every bit as important as what they say. Do they for example use long words or short, slang or formal language; do they have a stammer, or words they like to repeat? Are they prone to say things in long-winded ways or in short taciturn bursts? None of these choices are arbitrary, they are all reflections of character. A PhD in literature will obviously speak very differently than a sportscaster. A business executive will sound different from a musician.

If you have done your prewriting preparation, especially your first person character monologues, you will have already gone a long way toward developing each character's idiosyncratic voice.

Dialogue and Scenes:

Once you put your character into a scene that is hopefully rich in story content and conflict, you will find that your dialogue evolves to a new level, that of the alchemy of interaction. Dialogue in a story does not exist in a vacuum, but is in fact a synergistic dance between characters. So ask yourself questions such as: Does your character interrupt other characters, never letting them finish a thought? Is one character silent, while another rambles? (Keep in mind that silence is as powerful a communicator as speech.) Does your character use words as weapons and if so how effectively? How does your character express an emotion like anger or love that may be different from another character? One character, for example, may show they love someone by teasing them mercilessly, while another may go completely mute around the love object.

Subtext:

Finally, you must also develop the fine art of writing subtext. What is subtext? It is meaning or intent that lie underneath the lines. It is what a character actually means, though they may be saying something very different. Subtext in dialogue is what makes a story richer and more challenging. Why? Because life is full of subtext. People often hide behind words, and readers and audiences know this, so they enjoy trying to pick up the "real" meaning beneath what a character says.

Subtext usually does not appear as strongly in a first draft as in later drafts, as the first draft is for “getting it all out,” and therefore the writing may initially be more on the head, less subtle. Still, it is important to understand, even early on, its importance.

Exploring the elements of differentiation, interaction, and subtext will help you to write your dialogue more convincingly and effectively.

Making a Scene 1: 5 W's and an H

We briefly discussed scenes when talking about storyboarding. Now we will look at them in greater depth.

Keep in mind that a scene is not synonymous with a chapter. You may have one scene or a number of scenes within a single chapter. Each time you change location, time, or have a new set of characters, you generally have a new scene.

Scenes are the building blocks of a story. A scene is important not only in relation to itself but in relation to the other scenes in the piece. Remember, you are “building” a story from slowly escalating elements of cause and effect. The order must not only grow in intensity, but must feel logical and inevitable. As in journalism, it is important, when approaching a scene, to ask the 5 W's: *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, and *when*. I would also add *how* to the list.

Who:

Who is in your scene? The protagonist, antagonist(s), allies, love interest, sidekicks? Who you choose to bring into each scene is not an arbitrary decision. It depends largely on the overall story you're trying to tell. Each character must have a clear function within both the scene and the story. Make sure you have no characters that do not add to a scene and further the story. And *never* bring in a character just for exposition or convenience.

What:

What is the intention of each character within the scene? What, in other words, does each character want? A scene without clear desires on the part of each character will lie flat, even if you feel like you are filling it with conflict. What is the function of this scene within the overall story? Is it the inciting incident, a confrontation, investigation, revelation, climactic moment, resolution? Labeling your scenes this way, where you can, will help you know how best to place them.

Where:

Where is the scene taking place? Location can have a key effect on the tone of a scene, or the potential outcome. A love scene that happens in a park will obviously be different than one that happens in an apartment. Questions asked in a police station feel different than the same questions asked in a court of law.

When:

When does the scene take place? In the morning, afternoon, evening? In the present or the past (a flashback scene)? Or does the scene play with a more non-linear, abstract use of time?

In like manner, how do you use time in the entire piece? Are all the scenes sequential, or do they bounce around in time? Is the story happening now, or in a particular year in the past? How much time passes between scenes or acts, and how do those time jumps progress your story?

Why:

In the beginning of your book or play, you must ask: Why now? Why are you choosing to start the story with the scene that you do? Does this scene contain the inciting incident, or is it a setup for the inciting incident? Either way, answer the question, *why* is this day different than any other? In the successive scenes, ask yourself *why* your characters are acting in a particular way. Look at previous scenes. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Characters come into scenes with agendas and needs driven by what they have already experienced in the story.

How:

And finally, *how* a character expresses his or her needs in a scene can vary enormously – from reticence, to passive aggressiveness, to sarcasm, to silence – all depending on that character's unique style and personality. Also, keep in mind that how a character behaves throughout the story may very well change as the character changes.

In scene construction, asking yourself the 5 W's and 1 H will help you create active vibrant scenes that function well in your story.

Making a Scene 2: The Beat Goes On

The term: a beat, or a beat of action, is often used when talking about constructing scenes in a story. I would like to delve here into what a beat is and how it can be used to strengthen a scene.

A beat is a segment of a scene where a certain number of interactions between the characters take place, all circling around one intention. For example, there may be a “seduction” beat where that part of the scene is dedicated to one character trying to seduce another. That is the overall beat’s intention, but of course you can (and should) break it down into what each character’s individual intention is within the beat. One character may be trying to seduce, but the other could be resisting. In like manner that other character could also be responding. As I have mentioned in other contexts, it is helpful if both the overall intention of the beat and each individual intention is expressed as a verb. This works even when the intentions are subtler like a character *persuading* someone, or *avoiding* something. In other words, verbs can be just as readily used to describe a psychological interchange as a physical one.

Keep in mind that the beats are all intended to work together to enable the expression of the intention of the whole scene. The scenes, in turn, work together to express the intention (the premise) of the entire story.

So, in a way, a story is like a fractal. A fractal is an occurrence in nature where the micro level imitates the macro level. This is called self-similarity. An example would be the veining pattern in a leaf that reflects the pattern of leafing on a branch which in turn imitates the growth pattern of the branches of the tree. In similar fashion, at each level of a story, you are asking the same set of questions, building up from the smallest level (beat) to the largest (story).

Now if, at this point, you are saying, whoa – this is way too much structure – where does creativity come in?

Well, even when the intention of each scene has been worked out in advance during the storyboarding phase, these intentions may well begin to change and evolve during the process of putting them into effect. And certainly, when breaking them down into individual beats, you will be working at a much more intuitive and experimental level: trying out various dialogue exchanges, feeling the “flow” of the scene and sensing whether the overall effect is the desired one. However, at some point in that process, asking yourself the questions: where do the beats land and does each beat have its own intention, is helpful in honing and tightening the scene.

Remember, like music, writing has its own rhythmic characteristics. And so, like a beat of music marking melodic and rhythmic content in a measure, beats in a story mark emotional and temporal content in a scene.

Conflict: The Art of Not Playing Nice

I don't know about you, but I was always a good girl. Ready to work hard for my grades. Careful to follow the rules of society. And certainly never wanting to confront, really... anyone. Although I have grown more assertive with time, I am still careful not to unduly offend, or stomp on people's feelings.

But when writing a story you cannot play nice. When it comes to how you treat your characters - sorry, gloves off. In good dramatic writing you need to place your characters in tough, sometimes untenable situations that bring out both the worst and the best in them. You need to challenge your characters, force them to take risks, place them in either emotional or physical danger (or both) and royally stir up their lives. In other words, in good dramatic writing, the worst thing you can do is avoid conflict.

Now, I find beginning writers get a little confused about what dramatic conflict is. What it is not is a scene filled with people yelling at each other, if that is all they are doing. Nor is it a scene of people taking different stances on a subject and debating it back and forth. But... (that beginner might say) these scenes are full of conflict. No, they are full of argument, that is not dramatic conflict.

Dramatic conflict always has movement. Characters and forces oppose each other *in order to* move the story line and the premise of the story ever forward. Conflict for conflict's sake is static. Conflict that takes the character (and thus the story) into ever escalating action that leads to an inevitable confrontation (called the obligatory scene - which we will discuss in more depth later) and then to a resolution, is dramatic conflict.

I have also noticed a tendency in some writers to believe all conflict is external. They put their character in imminent physical danger, have that danger become increasingly worse, and then have the character find his way out. This is a good formula for some thrillers and action films, but generally conflict needs to be expressed at both the external *and* internal levels. You need to create situations for your characters in which they are not only in conflict with others (or the world) but with *themselves*. Their inner belief system or deep values should be seriously challenged. As Dara Marks says in *Inside Story*: "External actions are always driven by internal need... If this relationship between outer experiences and inner value is undeveloped, then we're only being told half the story." This combination of inner and outer conflict helps create multi-dimensional characters and a more nuanced story. Michael Corleone in the *Godfather*, must struggle not only with external forces of mob violence and power plays, but with his internal struggle between wanting out and family loyalty. And think of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Ostensibly his conflicts are with the world: his boss who fires him, his sons with

whom he continually fights because they don't live up to his dreams for them. But at the heart is his inner conflict (most poignantly represented by his dreamlike conversations with Uncle Ben) in which he cannot accept that the American Dream is not within his grasp. It is this need for self acceptance predicated on worldly success that ultimately drives him to suicide (to get the insurance money and prove he has some "worth" in the world).

So ultimately, conflict is not an arbitrary story element you paste onto a scene because you know you must. It is instead a breathing, organic key to creating drama, it is the fuel that energizes your entire story.

Three Act Structure: Beginning, Middle, and End

It is likely you have heard that fiction (and nonfiction, for that matter) are divided into three structural acts. Three act structure means that all stories have a beginning, middle and end. Each of these acts functions in a very particular way.

The beginning, or Act One, often called the *setup*, usually consists of three key elements: introduction of the protagonist(s), establishment of the protagonist's problem, and an inciting incident. The *inciting incident* is something that happens close to the beginning of the story that both establishes the protagonist's problem and sets the action rolling. An example of an inciting incident might be: the protagonist's brother, whom he hates, goes broke and has to move into the protagonist's home. This triggers all sorts of sibling issues, rivalries, and challenges for the protagonist as he struggles to both get his brother out of his house and resolve deep seated resentments towards him.

Act One is also where the *question* of the story is set up. This is a question that will run the length of the story and only be answered at the end. Will McMurphy triumph over Nurse Ratched? Will Willy Loman learn to let go of his unrealistic dreams? Will Michael Corleone hold on to his ideals? Will Blanche DuBois (*Streetcar Named Desire*) finally find the peace she craves? It is in Act One we see what the protagonist wants and get our first indications that it won't be so easy to obtain.

Act Two is where the protagonist, in pursuit of a solution to their problem, encounters a series of escalating obstacles. The term *escalating* is important here. Although there will be natural peaks and troughs in the action, each peak must be at a higher level than the one before. This is often called *rising action*. (We will deal with rising action in more detail later.) In this act we must feel like things are getting worse and worse for the protagonist and they must dig within themselves to find ever greater resources to try and accomplish their goal. This goal must not only be something they want, but something they want very badly. In other words, the *win/lose factor* (what is at stake for them) is very high. Life and death is at stake for Romeo and Juliet. Freedom is at stake for McMurphy. His entire self-worth is at stake for Willy Loman. Loyalty is at stake for Michael Corleone. Sanity is at stake for Blanche DuBois. Even in comedies there is a win/lose factor, something that matters enormously to the character.

Act Three, generally called the *resolution*, begins with the climax (often called the *obligatory scene*). This is the scene where the character is faced with a crisis, an intense, explosive confrontation that all the preceding scenes have led up to. In this scene, the protagonist takes final decisive action to deal with their problem. This action may lead to success, it may lead to failure. But it will, one way or the other lead to a conclusion of the problem. Think of the final confrontation (rape scene) between Blanche and Stanley in *Streetcar*. Stanley even says: "We've

had this date with each other from the beginning.” It leads to Blanche losing her grasp on sanity. In *Death of a Salesman*, it is the final confrontation between Willy and his sons that propels him to commit suicide. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the final confrontation with Nurse Ratched.

In terms of proportions, Act One usually takes up a fourth or less of the story, Act Two usually about a half, and Act Three another fourth, although some resolutions are considerably shorter.

Each act should feel like it leads not only seamlessly, but inevitably to the next one. By the time of the climax, this inevitability will feel like a freight train pounding down the tracks to what can only be one destination. To form this kind of structural integrity, intensity and inexorability is no easy task. But it is what allows a reader or audience to feel their emotional investment in the story has been thoroughly paid off.

Character: An Arc Is an Arc

I'm sure you've heard plenty in writing classes about a character "arc." And sometimes, looking at character this way can seem formulaic and forced. However, I will argue that if you have all your essential story elements in place, the journey that the character takes from the beginning of your story to the end will not only feel unforced, it will feel natural and right.

Story really is about character. Because the essential structure of all good stories is the following: Take a multi-dimensional character and place them in a situation that challenges them to the utmost of their core. Have them rise to the occasion by drawing from the best of themselves and/or by discovering resources within themselves they didn't know they had. Along the way, they may sabotage themselves, trip up, or have setbacks, but ultimately they will dig within and find a way to succeed. Conversely, have your character fail to find a solution because of some flaw within themselves that destroys any chance of success. Make sure along their path, they have moments when it seems they may succeed, or where hope is evident. But ultimately they will fail because the flaw is too powerful to overcome.

Either way, the character will not remain static. They will change, for the better or worse, because of the situation you have placed them in. And, importantly, this change needs to be an incremental one. A good story will not have a character jump from say, A to J (or A to D, if the change is smaller) but instead will have them go from A to B, and then to C and so forth. Each small adjustment in their character leads to the next. They will shed their old skin slowly, revealing the bits of fresh skin beneath, until finally, a new self is revealed.

Think of Dickens's "A Christmas Carol." Scrooge does not suddenly, at the appearance of the first ghost, become a magnanimous, generous soul. He must go through the trial of each successive ghost and the wrenching lessons they teach, altering little by little his views of life until he "gives up the ghost" and makes his final transformation.

As this story (and all good stories) reveal, it is about tribulation leading to transformation. It is the testing of the soul. Even action movies, full of plot points and special effects, work best when this aspect of character growth underlies the story.

The character of Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, at first enamored with the glamorous Jay Gatsby and the lifestyles of the very rich on Long Island, learns, step by step, that all that glitters is not gold, and finally decides to return to his small home town. George, in *Of Mice and Men*, trying his best to protect the handicapped Lennie, moves inevitably to a place where he must mercifully kill his friend. Idealistic Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, slowly learns, while attending her father's defense trial of a black man falsely accused of rape, that "right" does not

always prevail. But that does not diminish the power of men like her father who, regardless, fight for it.

In this process, allow your characters to surprise you. You may have already determined where they will end up and even worked out many of the scenes that will lead them there. But, as most of you already know, once you start writing, your characters can sometimes get a little unruly and want to take the reins. Let them. Find out where they're going. You can always pull them in again, if you need to. But if you've created strong enough characters, you may find they take you to deeper and more intriguing places than you had originally imagined. This exploration can help make your character's transformation that much more compelling.

Ultimately, an arc is just an arc. It's a steady curving motion upward or downward until a resolution is arrived at. At the beginning of this curve, your character is one thing. At the end, they are something else. This could be a large change, or a small, but a change it must be.

If you've written your story well, this arc will be invisible and feel inevitable.

It's all in the wrist.

Rising Action

To have a story that feels satisfying one scene to the next, you must have *Rising Action* (also known as *Rising Conflict*). What exactly does “Rising Action” mean?

The term was first coined in 1863 by German novelist and playwright, Gustav Freytag and later refined by the eminent drama theorist Lajos Egri.

As Freytag wrote in *Technique of the Drama*, “What drama presents is a struggle, which, with strong perturbations of the soul, the hero wages against opposing forces.” He then said that “action rises to the point of climax, and then falls away.” Lajos Egri wrote: “Two determined, uncompromising forces in combat will create a virile rising conflict.”

Notice the type of language used in these two descriptions: “struggle,” “wages” “opposing” “virile,” “uncompromising,” “combat,” “forces.” These are strong, active words that pulse with energy and vitality. That is what you want your story to do, pulse with energy and vitality. So, how do you do that?

Both Freytag and Egri insist that the creation of strong rising action depends upon opposing forces struggling against each other in ever escalating tension until a climax is reached. Note, also, the importance Freytag placed on both internal conflict (perturbations of the soul) and external conflict (opposing forces).

Egri adds that rising conflict is achieved best through strong multidimensional characters who, in their desire to reach their goal, prove the premise of the story. Remember premise? It is the clear throughline that drives the entire story. Conflict is, in other words, the means to express your premise. Or you can also view the premise as your blueprint for mapping out each conflict and how it leads to the next.

But, warns Egri, if you are not careful, you can fall into the traps of creating what he calls, “static conflict,” or “jumping conflict.”

Static conflict is conflict that does not bring about any change, but remains at the same level. The Hatfields and McCoys can fight on and on, but if nothing changes between them, the conflict is static. Two characters can argue until they’re blue in the face, but if neither ever persuades the other of anything or moves the other to action, that conflict is static. *Jumping conflict*, on the other hand, does involve change, but it is change that is too abrupt. Someone being irritable in one scene and homicidal in the next, is an example of jumping conflict. Instead, Egri argues, the writer needs to create “slowly rising” conflict. Slowly rising conflict means that each conflict in a story *logically* causes the one that follows and each is more intense than the one before. In other words, with each successive conflict, the tension builds, not in some arbitrary way, but in a way that is *organic* to the needs of the characters and the premise of the story.

As an analogy for Rising Action, think of a tea kettle set to boil. First there is one bubble, then two, then three, then the intensity of the roiling water which sets off a piercing whistle. That whistle is like the climatic scene, when all the progressively intensifying scenes come to a head. It is only after that, that the kettle is taken off the flame and the water starts to cool. In like manner, resolution, a releasing of the tension, follows climax.

Every story must have Rising Action, but making sure that action rises at just the right pace and intensity is one of the challenges a writer faces.

Rediscovering Premise

We've all had that feeling when writing a first draft. We start with energy, excitement – each scene pouring into the next. Our characters are talking to us, the conflicts feel fresh and compelling. And then... almost without warning, the momentum slows, or completely stops. We're not sure where to go next, or worse, we feel like we've hit a dead end.

I will make the argument that in almost all cases it is because we have lost sight of our premise, or we need to devise a new one.

Let's review premise. Premise is the one sentence statement that sums up the overall direction of your story. It is a proposition that your story is out to prove. *Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its desire. Intolerance leads to isolation. Poverty encourages crime. Rationalism conquers superstition. Dishonesty leads to exposure.* Each of these may sound like a universal statement, however premise is, in fact, the individualized statement of the world of your story. Your premise could just as easily be: *Dishonesty leads to success.* Although this is not the most laudable of moral statements, it could be exactly what you're trying to prove in your story: For example, a scrupulously honest politician learns that the only way to succeed at politics is through dishonesty. Remember, you are crafting a *specific* proposition that applies to *your* story.

As I said, in writing your first draft you may come across two premise related issues that are impeding your progress:

The first is that although, during your prewriting stage, you devised a strong premise, you have now inadvertently veered away from it. You may have planned out your scenes to reflect your premise, but as the writing progressed, your characters or the situations began to run away with you. Before you knew it, you were no longer on the forest path, but instead, mired in the brambles. It is not your premise that is at fault here, it is the losing sight of it. You need to take a long clear look at the present state of your story and ask yourself: Do my scenes still reflect a step by step proving of my premise? If they don't, revise the scenes until they do.

The second possible issue is, although you have successfully stuck to your premise, you find, in the actual writing process, your scenes are drying up or your characters are protesting that they don't feel right moving in the direction in which you are forcing them. Well then: *Change* your premise! The point is not to feel so married to your chosen premise that your story suffers. Instead, you want to find the *right* premise that inspires your story to move powerfully forward. This is part of the writing process, to allow character and scene to dictate change *when necessary*.

You might then say, well, if I can lose sight of premise, or change it one or more times, what is the point of having one? Despite the fact that premise can be malleable as you move through your writing process, it is still the torch that lights the way, without which your story could descend into confusion or lack of coherence. Ultimately, it is easier to retrace a lost premise, or refashion a new, more workable premise, than to write a story without one.

Crisis, Climax and Resolution

In past columns, I have mentioned the terms *Climax* and *Resolution*. I would like to explore these story elements in more detail along with *Crisis*, another important element. In my column on Rising Action, I explained how each scene builds incrementally and logically to a climactic scene. That scene, often called the “obligatory scene” is essential to good story writing. It is the moment that the readers or audience consciously or unconsciously are waiting for. It is the final confrontation between the protagonist(s) and the antagonist or antagonistic forces; it is the high point, or peak of the story.

As you may recall, every story asks a question: Will Blanche find peace? Will Amir find the redemption he craves? Will McMurphy prevail against Nurse Ratched? Will Romeo and Juliet be able to live happily ever after? Will Jay Gatsby win Daisy’s love? Will Willy Loman learn self-acceptance despite his lack of success? In the climactic scene, all the forces of the story converge to move the story toward a definitive answer to this question. When Blanche is raped by Stanley, the audience knows any chance for peace for her has been shattered. When Amir battles to rescue Hassan’s son from a tragic life in Afghanistan, his redemption has begun. When McMurphy has the final losing confrontation with Nurse Ratched, things do not look good for him. When Romeo discovers his beloved Juliet asleep, but, presuming her dead, takes his own life, all chance of their happiness is destroyed. When Willy has the final argument with his sons, followed by the fantasy scene with “Uncle Ben,” the idea of suicide enters his mind and all hope of self-acceptance is gone.

The climactic scene is also the highest emotional point of the story. It should be the moment that feels the most dramatic and the most intense. It also should feel inevitable, in the sense that all scenes have led up to it, and it could not have turned out otherwise.

But before this climactic scene, a *Crisis* may arise in the story. A crisis, different from a climax, is a critical moment, a moment of decision, or turning point in the story. It is often what leads directly to the climax. Such a moment, for example, occurs in *Death of a Salesman*, when Willy’s sons decide to leave him in the bathroom of the restaurant - when in other words, they cruelly abandon him. This crisis leads inevitably to the final confrontation/climax, that in turn leads to his suicide.

His suicide is the *Resolution* of the story. Resolution (sometimes called “falling action” to mirror “rising action”) can be just a brief moment at the end of the climactic scene or be one or more scenes that follow the climax. McMurphy’s lobotomy is the resolution. Juliet’s suicide and

the discovery of her and Romeo's death by their families is the resolution. Blanche being taken away to the mental hospital is the resolution. The essential role of resolution is to say, yes, as the climactic scene portended, this is how things have turned out. During the resolution of the story you may also have *Denouement*. Literally meaning "untying," it is where the tight bonds of the plot now loosen, unanswered questions are answered, characters come together for a last time. The denouement in *Death of a Salesman* is the funeral scene; the denouement in *Cuckoo's Nest* is when the Chief smothers McMurphy and then makes his escape; the denouement in *Romeo and Juliet* is when Escalus stands up and tells everyone their feuds are the cause of Romeo and Juliet's deaths. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, although the resolution ends with Blanche's line: "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," there are a few moments of denouement where we see Stella's grief at her sister's fate, and Stanley's attempt to soothe her.

So, as you tackle that important first draft, remember: Crisis, climax, and resolution, like the other elements of story already discussed: premise, inciting incident, rising conflict, and character arc, all contribute to the creation of a compelling piece that will keep readers turning pages and audiences in their seats.

PART THREE

REWRITING

The First Pass

Stories are not written, they are *rewritten*. I cannot stress enough the importance of that statement.

It is during rewriting that you ask the hard structural questions, learn to ruthlessly edit, identify clunky dialogue or passages of exposition, sense when one scene needs to be placed elsewhere in the story or perhaps be taken out entirely. This is the time, in other words, to be as objective about your work as possible, to approach your story, if you will, as if it were someone else's and you have been given the job of making it as strong as possible.

The best way to gain some of that objectivity is to put the first draft away. Yes. For at least two weeks. Find something else to do, straighten your office, pay those bills, go for long walks, or start tackling that long To Do list that kept getting longer while you were deep into writing.

You will be surprised, when you return to the story, by what stands out as working or not working. This fresh perspective will go a long way toward jump starting your second draft.

So now, looking at it fresh, reread the entire story. As you do this, keep a pencil nearby, because things will immediately jump out at you. Quickly cross out anything that feels awkward, and if things come to you, just as quickly jot them down in the manuscript. But don't stop to do an intensive rewrite of any part. This is your first pass and you want to get through the entire draft as rapidly as possible.

There are other things I recommend that you notice as well during this initial process. These are general impressions of issues that need work but that you plan to tackle in depth later. For example you may scribble comments like: "Too much exposition," or "This scene doesn't feel like it belongs here," or "This scene doesn't advance the story." Of course you are free to also add positive comments like: "This is where the action really takes off!" or "Good conflict!" But regardless, the point is not to feel like you have to fix all the problems at this moment, but to gently peruse the story and get a sense of what is working well and what needs further work.

Each day of this first pass, ignore the temptation to start again from the beginning, because you will just keep finding new things (I guarantee)! Start from where you left off and just keep going.

Why am I advocating this approach? Well because it is often so tempting to get mired in the process of reworking one scene over and over again without seeing that scene in the context of the whole. This is overview time, not zeroing-in time. The other reason is a psychological one.

Looking at the entire story reminds you that you indeed *have* a story! It may be flawed (and what first draft isn't?) It may be way over (or under) written, it may even make your head ache, but you have your raw material. Your once shapeless slab of marble has a tentative form. And it is that form you will continue to chip away at or add to from this point on. Honor that form, honor what you have accomplished – recognize that in that rawness lie the secrets you will need to hone your work into something beautiful.

Plot + Character = Story

Now you will move more deeply into the rewriting process. As you do so, you will be looking closely at the two essential elements of your story: character and plot. To review: Plot, as distinguished from *Story*, is the series of events that happen in a story. Character is everything that makes up the personality, wants and needs of the people in your story. Now, who a character *is* is reflected in what the character *does* or *says*. In other words plot and character are inextricably tied. Together, they make up Story: they work hand in glove to move the story forward. If something is not working on the character level, it will likely affect plot and vice versa.

So, as you're rewriting and bringing your critical eye to bear, you need to ask some hard questions about these two elements and how well they are working together in your story:

- Have you created characters, both protagonist(s) and antagonists that are carrying the action of the story? In other words, are their wants strong enough, their stakes high enough that they fight the good fight till the end?
- Have you created a complex enough protagonist that is dealing with both external and internal conflict? In other words, a character with interesting *layers*?
- Is your protagonist ending up in a different place than where they start out? And does their journey reflect your premise?
- Is that journey a step by step process with no illogical jumps? Does cause lead to effect?
- In each scene, is there conflict between your characters? Does someone win and someone lose, even subtly? Has the ground shifted between them, if only a little, which leads to their next scene together starting from a different place?
- Is there too much exposition between the characters (I will deal more extensively with exposition and how to avoid it in a future chapter.)
- What about the other characters? Do they each have an arc as well? It does not need to be as dramatic as the protagonist arc, but it makes for a more interesting story when they evolve and change to some degree as well. (Although, sometimes a secondary character does not change, especially a character acting as a catalyst.)
- Are there places where the energy lags or downright stops? Make sure that there is movement in each scene, that it picks up from the energy of a previous scene and creates more energy to propel the story into the next scene. Culprits of a lagging plot are scenes filled with argumentation but no real conflict, or complaining, but no real action. If a scene feels repetitive of a former scene, it is. If it feels circular, it is.

- Are the interchanges between characters rich in behavior as well as dialogue? Remember, sometimes how a character behaves is as important as what they say.
- Finally, have you avoided all use of a Deus Ex Machina? That handy external force or person that saves the day in the end, rather than the resolution resulting from the efforts of the protagonist?

Ultimately, how the plot moves from scene to scene is completely dependent on the struggle and transformation that the character is going through. And in turn, you must have created a strong enough character to sustain your plot. It is important when rewriting to be constantly aware of this inter-dependence. You cannot pull on the thread of one without tugging on the other. Plot? Character? It's *Story* and *Story* is about both.

Exposing Your Exposition

Okay, let's talk about it. The dreaded *exposition*. That thing without which your story can wander into the shoals of confusion, but that, if not handled properly, can stick out like a sore thumb, or worse, make your story come to a screeching halt.

So it is time to look at the exposition in your first draft and ask yourself some tough questions:

- Have you given your audience information without it seeming like information? Think of what a mother does when giving a recalcitrant child medicine: she hides it in something sweet, or pops it into their mouths while distracting them with something exciting. In like manner, you want to hide your exposition. In dialogue, for example, bad exposition would be: *"Joe, I know you don't like my mother," Mary said, "But she just left Dad and she has no place to go, so she's going to live with us."* Better would be: *"What is that taxi doing out there?" Joe asks, "Is that your mother? Why is she carrying bags?" "Now listen, honey" Mary says, "Don't get upset, I didn't know what else to do..."* In the first example, it is straight information, in the second example, it is a discovery within a more dynamic interchange.
- Have you woven your exposition seamlessly into your action so that forward motion is still maintained? There is an expression among writers that you want to give information while a character is being chased by villains or trying to fling himself from a moving vehicle. This, of course, is an over-exaggeration, but the point is sound. If you can intersperse your information into a conflict rich, active scene, that information feels integral to the scene, rather than arbitrarily placed within it.
- Have you avoided "shared information" that kind of exposition that two characters know very well between them, but are only sharing for the sake of the audience? For example: *"Leila, as you know, our sick father has been getting worse and worse..." says Andrew.* Well, if Leila knows that, why is Andrew feeling the need to tell her? He shouldn't. The truth is, it is the writer who is feeling the need to tell the reader. If two characters already share a piece of information, find another way to reveal it.
- And keep this in mind: Do you really need all the exposition that you have put in your first draft? Most likely, you don't! A few words here, a hint of something there, keeping things a mystery for a while, and then revealing them in the middle of a heated scene, this is often all you need to get across those important details. Remember, your reader is more clever than you think, they will pick up on clues, fill in the blanks and glean what's missing from what is there. And remember also, they like to work at something! If you give them too much, or reveal things too early, you remove some of the challenge of figuring things out, some of the suspense that makes for a good story.

Conquering the art of exposition is not easy, but the payoff is major. It is one of the things that separates the amateur writer from the pro!

Fine Tuning

During this section on rewriting, I have continually referred to fixing problems in your first draft, implying that you are on your second draft, but knowing, of course, that if you have been diligently rewriting, you are likely into a third, fourth, or even further draft by now. Each draft is a gradual revising and refining of the draft before. Sometimes the process is smooth, and sometimes it is one of fits and starts. As I mentioned before, when you pull at one thread, you may well unravel the fabric in another location. But ultimately, as you keep working the material, whether it be in structure, characterization, description or dialogue, the story gets stronger and more sure. This is as much about art, as craft; instinct as knowhow.

Finally you arrive at a draft that feels right to you. Is it time to put it out there? Not quite yet. This is when you take a look at the finer details, this is when you want to do some careful honing.

Look at the beginning and end of each scene. Sometimes it is more effective to start a few more paragraphs in, or end a few paragraphs sooner than you do. It is stronger to be in full action or close to it, rather than to have too much preliminary material, or too long a trailing off at the end.

Then recheck all your dialogue. Have you given a lengthy monologue to a character that is more wordy than it should be? Have you had a character repeat something they've said earlier in the scene? Are there words like "Well," "Okay," "Look," starting out too many of your exchanges? Are there places where your dialogue is sounding more literary than spoken speech - places you can rough it up a bit, make it more conversational? Are there places where you need less dialogue and more behavior or even silence? Act the dialogue out. Listen for these things and more. And edit out what doesn't need to be there.

And of course, this goes without saying, but check for spelling, typos and grammar errors. Don't just trust spell check, it can fail you. Also make sure your manuscript is in proper submission format. Do not believe that you can send a manuscript out there any way you want. It will only label you as a rank amateur!

But of course, before you send your book or play out to agents, publishers or theaters, you would be wise to get some outside opinions first from trusted sources - be it colleagues, writing groups or workshops. Here you will discover if your vision is being communicated as you hope. In this process listen for recurring comments - those are likely areas you may need to revisit.

But it is important that you come into that final and more public phase of rewriting with a strong sense of your goals and intentions as a writer. A strong personal vision will better enable you to negotiate the feedback you get and discern what is valuable to listen to and what isn't.

In the end, it is your decision as to when a work is "complete." Leonardo DaVinci once said: "Art is never finished, only abandoned. " Well, that may well be true, and you can tinker with a piece forever if you want, but ultimately you must reach a point where the story is what it is going to be. That is when it is time to release your child out into the world and allow them to have a life of their own.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

TWO EXAMPLES OF THE FIVE QUESTIONS:

The Great Gatsby: (F. Scott Fitzgerald) 1. **Protagonist** – dual. Nick Carraway – the framing narrator and Jay Gatsby. 2. **What do they want?** Nick wants to escape his small town life. Gatsby wants Daisy Buchanan and wants to get her by proving himself worthy of her. 3. **What stands in their way?** For Nick, the new monied world in which he's immersed proves itself to be more and more morally corrupt. For Jay, it is Daisy's husband, Tom, but it is also Daisy herself who, despite Jay's idealized vision of her, is a selfish and shallow woman. 4. **Do they get what they want?** Nick does not embrace a new larger way of living, in fact, he sees the life he's longed for as empty and frivolous. Jay fails to get what he wants when asking Daisy to choose between him and Tom, she cannot give up the comfortable life she has known nor admit she has never loved her husband. 5. **How do they transform?** Nick realizes that the life of small town morality that he ran from is superior to this one and decides to return home. Gatsby is murdered at the end, as revenge for a hit and run for which he he took the blame to protect Daisy. So his ultimate transformation for never seeing Daisy for who she really was is death.

To Kill a Mockingbird: (Harper Lee) 1. **Protagonist.** One could argue for Atticus Finch, but the more likely protagonist, i.e. the one who goes through the transformative process is Atticus's daughter, Scout. 2. **What does she want?** She wants to see her much beloved and morally incorruptible father win his battle to represent a case against a black man wrongly accused of rape. 4. **What obstacles are in the way of this ideal?** Largely, not only the accuser, Bob Ewell, but the southern society and prejudices of her times. 4. **Does she get what she wants?** No. Atticus loses his case, which confuses and disturbs Scout. And even worse, the accused man, Tom, is shot. 5. **How does she transform?** She must mature and realize the distance that can often exist between the morals she's been taught and how badly people often really behave. That even her father cannot always prevail against this reality. However, she also sees the kindness of others when the sheriff saves the man, Boo Radley, who must kill to protect Scout.

APPENDIX B
RECOMMENDED BOOKS

THE ART AND CRAFT OF STORYTELLING by Nancy Lamb

THE ART OF DRAMATIC WRITING by Lajos Egri

FIND YOUR STORY, WRITE YOUR MEMOIR by Lynn C. Miller & Lisa Lenard-Cook

HOW TO WRITE A DAMN GOOD NOVEL (I & II) by James N. Frey

INSIDE STORY by Dara Marks

THE MIND OF YOUR STORY by Lisa Lenard-Cook

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S PROCESS by Buzz McLaughlin

STORY by Robert McKee

STRUCTURING YOUR NOVEL by K. M. Weiland

WRITING FICTION: A GUIDE TO NARRATIVE CRAFT by Janet Burroway