



Character Arcs

Dialogue

Backstory

Plot

Conflict

Story Arc

Subplots

World-building

Narrative Arc

THE NOVEL-WRITING TRAINING PLAN

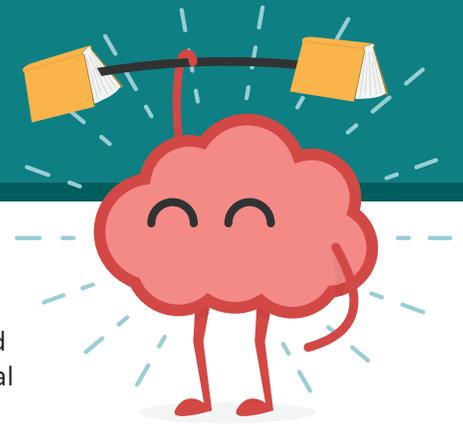
17 STEPS TO GET YOUR IDEAS IN SHAPE FOR THE MARATHON OF WRITING

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ProWritingAid

▶ INTRODUCTION



So you are ready to write your novel. Excellent. If you write 500 words each day, in 100 days, you'll have 50,000 words. That's a book in about 3 months. Totally do-able. Or maybe you are planning to go full-tilt and take part in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) where the goal is to get your first draft done in 30 days. Go for it!

Think of this book as your training regimen. Trying to run a marathon without taking the time to prepare your body would be hugely difficult. Maybe not impossible, but certainly harder than if you had spent the time getting your muscles ready. Similarly, it's not impossible to write a book without spending some time in advance preparing your brain for the task, but thinking through some of the essential elements of your story will make the whole process easier.

Give yourself a couple weeks before you start writing to think through your narrative, plan out your key plot points, flesh out your characters, and begin to build your world. This way, when you begin your writing journey, you will have a map to follow along the way.

Turn the page, and let's get started!

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▶ CHAPTER 1 START WITH YOUR ORIGINAL IDEA

In life, as in writing, there are several questions which continue to defy a single, unified opinion:
Which came first: the chicken or the egg?

Or the question for most writers is: **Which came first: the plot or the characters?**

Ask 20 authors how they begin their stories—either by identifying the main character or the plot first—and the one certainty is you won't get the same answer 20 times.

Regardless of whether you woke up one morning with an incredible plot twist for your novel, or a fully-formed character started speaking in your mind, everyone needs a starting point for their writing. The key is to realize that, in the best stories that resonate most with readers, plot and character are intrinsically interwoven.

IT ALL STARTS WITH AN IDEA

The first thing you'll need is an original idea. What kind of story is it? A romance? Suspenseful thriller? A comedy or tragedy? Think about a movie. You wouldn't cast parts without knowing what the movie is about, right? Imagine casting Liam Neeson in a *Big Momma's House* type film. You would be waiting for his daughter to get kidnapped the whole time!

Some characters just don't work with the type of novel you're writing. You need to know a little bit about where your story is going in order to decide what traits you need in a protagonist and an antagonist. If your story culminates in a life-or-death situation, you need someone who can handle the outcome and your reader needs to understand how and why they can.

An adventurous external plot requires a character whose unexpected growth is rewarding and life-altering. You see this in the unlikely heroes of such stories as *Lord of the Rings*, *The Truman Show*, *Harry Potter*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *The Martian*.

BUT HOW DO YOU FIND THAT NUGGET OF AN IDEA TO START WITH?

A lot of authors start with a "what if" scenario to form a general idea of the plot. "What if there's a scrawny little boy with glasses who just found out he's a wizard capable of magic?" Imagine JK Rowling sitting on a crowded train when the idea of a boy who didn't know he was a wizard popped into her mind. When he first conceived *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding must have wondered "What would happen if a group of school boys were stranded on an island with no adult supervision?"

This is where "the plot thickens." Once you have that initial idea, your brain immediately starts to wonder what kind of person would work best in your "what if" scenario. You start to merge the plot details with the character traits that can generate the most internal conflict for your protagonist.

Imagine a character who would hate being put into the situation you've created. And imagine how your plot might twist and turn to escalate the pressure and the tension for your main character.

Or say you've thought of this excellent character who's suddenly fully formed in your mind. You can play the "what if" game with characters, too. Try to imagine what would happen to your character if his or her worst fears were realized?



For example, you have a mental picture of a devoted wife and mother who has structured her life around the needs and wants of her family. You can see her, you know what she sounds like and what her deepest fears and desires are. Now, what if she found out her husband and children were not who she thought they were?

Your characters might end up hijacking your plot, taking it over and making it their own. But that's OK because you want a story with the characters and plot so finely intertwined that you can't have one without the other.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE YOUR GREAT IDEA, WHERE DO YOU TURN NEXT?

It's all too easy to jump into writing a novel with an excellent storyline, only to have it peter out halfway through because you don't know where it's going, or because you've dug your characters into a hole without first planning how they were going to get out of it.

Alternatively, you might create incredibly relatable characters who emote beautifully all over the page, but find that you can't quite figure out what should happen to them. **So make a plan.**

If you're already an outliner by nature, this will warm your soul. If the idea of planning ahead makes you nervous, well, stick with us anyway. It's not that bad—truly.

There are 3 things you need to know before you start:

1 Draft your characters. You need to know who your protagonist is and what he or she wants most and fears most. While your character is certainly going to become much more solid as you write, you should still know the basics - likes and dislikes, any quirky little personality traits, backstory, his or her voice, and what motivates him or her. We'll look in more depth at crafting real-life, fully-formed characters in the next chapter, so keep reading.

2 Draft your story's world. You want a dynamic setting as the backdrop to your story. Knowing where (and when) the action takes place drives characters' decisions. Does your story take place in war-torn France during WWII? Or does it take place in an imagined universe very different to our own? The "where and when" help lead your characters in decision-making based on the kind of solutions available to them. You wouldn't set a novel in the early 1900s only to discover that your protagonist needs new technology to help solve a problem. We'll talk more about creating your story's world in Chapter 3.

3 Define your story arc. You might consider this the map that guides your main character along the path to your desired end. The key is to realize that a map is not set in stone. Sometimes when you start out on a journey, you take some interesting side trips along the way, but your eventual ending point is still known. Your characters can deviate from the map when you come across a great plot twist, but you should have a general idea of where you're headed and how the individual character threads and supporting subplots tie together in the end. This will give you an idea of where things need to shake out in each chapter to keep the momentum moving forward and your characters evolving. More on story arc in Chapter 4.

WHAT'S NEXT?

You probably feel ready to burst onto the page, but we've only just done the equivalent of stretching our muscles. Take a break if you need it, then keep reading. In the next chapter we lay the groundwork for creating three-dimensional, relatable characters that make your readers laugh, cry, and want to be their best friends.

▶ CHAPTER 2 HOW TO CONSTRUCT A 3D MAIN CHARACTER

Have you ever read something and about 50 pages into it, you're just not feeling the main character? You're either not invested in her conflict or she's kind of ... boring.

Or worse, has an agent or editor to whom you've submitted your work ever commented that your main character (MC) is one-dimensional?

Now think about the latest book you couldn't put down. You could hardly wait to find out what happened to the MC. You just "got" her; she was relatable and you understood why she did the things she did.

She was obviously a three-dimensional MC. But what does that mean?

“It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does.”

William Faulkner

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE DEEPER DIMENSIONS OF AN MC

This is where a little forethought and planning will help you create a multi-dimensional MC.

If you're an incredibly intuitive person, you may be able to give your character three dimensions as you write, but most of us need to plot a character's dimensions to show real depth. Let's face it. Real life is three-dimensional. If we could predict how people will respond to situations, it would be so much easier to figure out how to ask the difficult questions.

Life is messy. Emotions are messy. Real life unfolds and unravels rather unpredictably. So should your characters. Consider the following three dimensions of character development:

The 1st Dimension

This is what we see on the outside. These are the surface traits, the little personality quirks and habits that characters have. This may be the real person or it may just be their social mask that they present to the world. Without any other dimensions, we'll never know how authentic it is. The supporting cast in our stories are one-dimensional. We don't need to know what's behind their façade. It's not important to your readers to know what kind of childhood the waiter at the restaurant had. But you do need to know that about your MC. That's where weaving in the other dimensions helps flesh out your characters.

One thing to note: avoid cliché quirks and tics for your main characters, and even in your supporting characters. The grumpy old man who screams at the kids to get off his lawn or the two-faced politician who preaches family values to the public yet has a mistress or two on the side—all of these clichéd character traits have been done to boredom and back. You definitely do not want to give your MC quirks that are tired or even too quirky.

The 2nd Dimension

This is what we see on the inside and where backstory comes into play. What is it about your MC's childhood that causes him to freeze up whenever someone gets too close? What are her inner conflicts or unfulfilled dreams that cause her to respond in certain ways? Everyone has fears

and weaknesses, resentments and inclinations that underlay the outer face they show the world. Sometimes that's a smokescreen to throw the reader off the path. When readers understand why an MC reacts the way he or she does, you've created empathy for that character. And the more empathy you can create for a character, the more readers will invest in reading.

The 3rd Dimension

These are the character's beliefs that lead to action and behavior. This is their moral substance. An MC's character isn't defined by their backstory or their inner conflict, but rather by the decisions they make when facing a moral situation. You may have been angry enough to smack someone in the face a time or two, but you decided not to. Why? Because of your moral character. That decision defines who you are. Now take a character who has a similar backstory and inner conflicts, but who *did* punch someone in the face. You've now created a completely different-dimensional character.

Hopefully you can see how each of the dimensions informs the others, but that they're distinct and unique. The 1st and 2nd dimensions don't necessarily dictate the 3rd. This is how you layer your character to create depth. Think of the layers of an onion. The outer layers aren't transparent. You can't see through one to what's underneath. You need to peel back to find what's at the core.

6 TIPS FOR CREATING 3D CHARACTERS

These tips will help you flesh out some multi-dimensional depth

1. Let them surprise you.

A shy person who's always timid suddenly finds himself flirting with an attractive stranger on the train. An experienced businessman gets tongue-tied when facing a big presentation or speech. Be open to unexpected reactions in your MC. Don't restrict your characters to acting a certain way all the time. Punch things up. Everyone acts out of character periodically; imbue your MC with a little "out of character" action and then hone in on the reason that allowed them to be different this time: loyalty, inner strength, love, fear, anger, anything really.

2. Let them search for a purpose.

We all—at least most of us—search for a greater purpose in our lives. Let your MC reach for one. When faced with a hard decision, let your character decide to take a different path because it brings her closer to her beliefs or dreams. Whether or not this turns out to be a good or bad decision is another story. Give your MC a sense of destiny and see where it takes her.

3. Let inner feelings be expressed physically.

When we feel good about ourselves, we might dress a little differently or spend more time on an up-do to make our outer appearance match the way we feel inside. Instead of using inner dialogue to tell us your main character is trying to fight off a wave of insecurity, show us the fingernails bitten and torn, ragged and bleeding. Trust your reader to be able to recognize and interpret the physical actions of your characters

4. Use conflicting emotions.

You know you want that third cookie before dinner, but you also really want to lose the last 10 pounds you've been working on. Human beings are naturally conflicted about a lot of things. Let us see that your MC is conflicted about her strongest beliefs. She'll be much more human for it.

5. Use real-life emotions.

You've experienced emotions in life. It may not have been the same scenario as your MC is

facing, but you can draw from your life experiences to inform your writing about what your character is feeling. Did you have a beloved pet die when you were a kid? Channel those emotions into your MC when something bad happens. The details aren't important; the human emotions of losing something cherished are.

6. Use dialogue to illustrate deceit or create power dynamics.

Often what comes out of your MC's mouth is quite different from what they are really thinking. Your reader has the unique ability to read your MC's thoughts and see whether they are being honest or manipulating the situation. We'll take a closer look at dialogue in Chapter 13.

TAKE-AWAYS

Human beings are conflicted, emotional creations that work on all three dimensions. They are the sum of all their parts, and that's the essence you want to convey when creating your MC.

They are a complicated mess of optimistic dreams and shameful secrets.

It's your job to show your readers these dimensions, creating engaging and compelling characters that are complex, frightening, endearing, and, most of all, empathetic.



▶ CHAPTER 3 HOW TO CREATE YOUR STORY'S WORLD

No matter what genre you write in, you need to build a world for your story. Every writer needs to build a world so that your readers can have a placeholder to figure out the context in which your story is set.

If you're writing a current-day story, you should know where it is set and what's happening in the world around your main characters. Imagine the movie *Forrest Gump* without the political and cultural wrangling. Without that story's world, Forrest would have been a seriously flat character.

If you're writing science fiction or supernatural stories, world-building is extremely important. The more fantastical your setting, the more time you'll need to spend developing it. Consider *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy—even *Star Wars*. For those stories to come alive, the main characters' experiences had to be set in those rich and textured worlds.

WHY YOU SHOULD BUILD YOUR WORLD

Your characters need a place for the story to unfold. It can't happen in limbo. A movie or a play without a set and background would be hard to follow. It gives you the context in which the characters are placed in time and space and helps your reader connect to your story. Even if the world looks like your own, it's still essential to build it for your audience.

In many ways, the world functions like another character, especially for science fiction and fantasy. Think about a novel you're currently reading. Can you picture his neighborhood or what his home looks like—majestic and imposing or squashed and run-down? Metropolitan, suburban or countryside? Do you have an image in your mind of her office, her car or her local bar? If you can visualize these things, the author has done a good job of setting up their world.

Sometimes the specific setting is essential to the story's narrative arc. Imagine if *To Kill a Mockingbird* had not taken place in the Deep South during the Great Depression when civil rights weren't on the horizon. Or if the book *Sarah's Key* was not set in both WWII and current-day scenarios, would the ending have been as emotional?

The more intimately you know your world and how it affects your story, the richer and deeper your writing will be.

DEVELOP THE SPECIFIC AND THE GENERAL

Start with the general. Is it set in modern day, a historical period, or on an alien planet? This will guide how deep you need to go in world-building.

If your setting is current day, you only need to describe the location and the setting for each scene in your story. Your audience will have an understanding of modern day New York, for example, but you still need to build a specific setting in New York, complete with noisy neighbors, a tiny apartment or a local coffee shop. But if your story is set in history or in a different culture from your own, you'll need to research cultural norms, economics, dress, and even technology so that your world rings with authenticity.

In a new fantastical world, you need to build the entire thing from the ground up:

1. Think about basic infrastructure.

What do people eat? Who takes care of public utilities like water, sewage, electricity—or are there even public utilities? You need to create an entire society and its underlying economy.

2. Why is your story's struggle happening now?

When all hell breaks loose in your story's world and your character must respond, you need to know what led up to those events. Is it because of something that happened 20 years ago or something that's going to happen 20 hours from now?

3. What about diversity?

Our world—or any world for that matter—has a diverse mix of people who don't hold the same opinions. Don't create a world where everyone believes in the government or interprets religion in the same manner. No two members of any society will think exactly the same way.

4. Use all five senses to create your world.

Nothing says more about a story's world than what its garbage smells like or how it looks after a hard rain. Whatever world you create, what do its transportation vehicles sound like as they roll past or fly overhead? Create a sense of place with sensuous information.

HOW TO BUILD YOUR WORLD

If you're looking for a way to get started, try these tips:

1. Read, read, read.

Read works by other authors where they've created full and rich worlds for their stories. The Harry Potter books are a great example of how a new world informs the story and compels Harry to act in certain ways.

2. Watch movies.

Movies are also a great way to get inspiration for your own work. Watch supernatural flicks or even animated movies like *Avatar* to see how someone else has constructed a new world.

3. Draw a map.

Use a big sheet of paper and plot out what your world looks like. Don't aim for a perfect drawing, just something to show you where everything is located and how your character can get around.

4. Outline your world's details.

What technology do they use? What is on the cusp of being invented? What types of plants and animals live in your world? How are the people different from yourself? How do most people survive or make their living?

5. Try on someone else's world.

Take parts of worlds created by others and combine them in a different way. Then give it a plot twist and you've created a new world, one in which your characters can grow and develop.

WHEN TO STOP WORLD-BUILDING

You don't need to write an encyclopedia on your newly created world. Your reader just needs to know the basics and a few of the specifics. Don't inundate them with tidbits of information about your world if those tidbits don't move your story forward.

Your world should inform your characters in ways that provide movement. If you put in a huge section about flora and fauna, it better be part of the plot line in chapters to come, something

your reader needs to know. Your world may play a central role in your character's development and growth, but it should never become the main character. Let it help you develop your main character's eventual denouement, but never take it over.

If you've written so much about your world that you haven't even started on the story yet, it's time to stop. You can always flesh it out in more detail as it becomes necessary.

MY WORLD IS BUILT. NOW WHAT?

You've patiently put in the work fleshing out your MC and constructing your story's world. It's time to map out your story arc. This step would be daunting without any prior training, but by now you'll be hitting the ground running. Let's go!



▶ CHAPTER 4 HOW TO DRAFT YOUR STORY ARC

The story arc (sometimes called the narrative arc) is a more poetic way of saying that each story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end—or Act One, Act Two, and Act Three. This has been the guiding template of stories since the ancient Greeks started writing them, and holds true whether you're writing fiction or non-fiction.

Where authors fall down on story arc is when nothing much happens to the main character by the end of the book. They haven't been tested in some profound way.

STORY ARCS AND CHARACTER ARCS

Your story arc and character arc should be melded together in such a way that you're not sure where one begins and the other ends. As your main character is tested, endures, and grows in a climactic way throughout the story arc, she naturally changes as a character by the end of the story.

You can't have a story arc without a character arc.

We'll get to character arc in the next chapter, but for now, know that both play off each other.

Character is plot,
plot is character.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

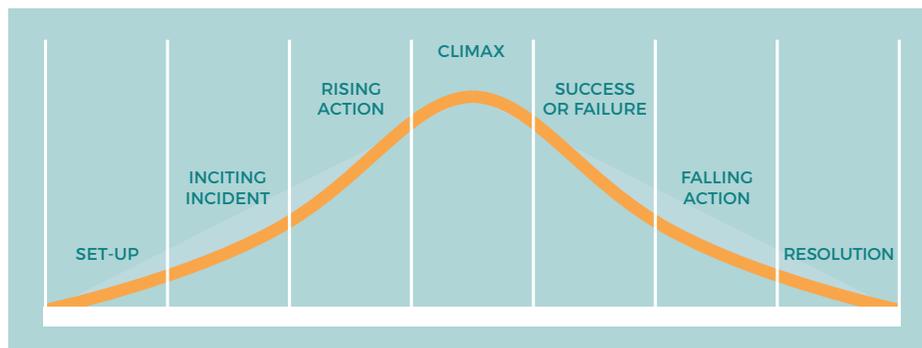
IN A WORD, WHAT'S IMPORTANT: ACTION

Your main character must be confronted by action—danger, threats, seduction, tests of bravery, moral dilemmas, or physical or emotional assault, to name a few. Consider the story arc of *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby starts out as a poor man who falls in love with a rich girl. He works hard to change his circumstances and win the girl. Then there's the climactic scene and the denouement. Everyone changes to a degree by the end.

A good story starts with a bang or a hook in Act One, something to get the reader's attention, and quickly accelerates to more action. Act Two, or the middle, is intertwined throughout with scenes of rising drama, suspense, or intensity and scenes of calm deliberation to let your readers catch their breath. Act Three culminates in a climax where the character is changed in some fundamental way, and then the tension falls back down until you've reached a satisfactory closure.

WHAT DOES A STORY ARC LOOK LIKE?

Story arcs look like a giant bell curve with the story starting at ground zero and rising, rising, rising, until it hits the climax point at the height of the curve. Then the arc starts to gradually drop back until you've hit level ground again.



Or it can look like a pyramid where each block is a scene that builds up the pyramid until the apex and then slowly comes down the other side until you're at the denouement.

If you're having problems identifying your story arc, graph your story on paper to ensure that the action rises, falls a little, rises even more, falls a slight bit, and keeps rising until reaching the climax. You might end up with something that looks like a bell curve, or you might end up with something that looks like a stock market index. Either way, your action should consistently raise the tension or the stakes until it reaches the peak.

YOUR STORY ARC IS YOUR GUIDE TO PLOTTING

Story arc deals with the overall layout of your story, how it is broken up into chapters and scenes, what is the conflict and climax, and what is the final resolution. Plot is the specific series of events that make up your story.

You need to have the big picture figured out first (the story arc) before you can start plotting how you'll get there. Each point in your plot occurs in a particular order and relates in some way to the other plot points.

We'll talk more about plotting in Chapter 6, but for now, just remember that your story arc and plot work together to create the DNA of your story.

HOW TO CREATE YOUR STORY ARC

Nigel Watts wrote in his book *Writing a Novel and Getting Published* that your story arc should follow these eight points:

1. STASIS

This is the current situation you find your main character in.

2. TRIGGER

This is an inciting event that changes the course for your main character.

3. QUEST

The trigger results in a quest for your main character to achieve a goal.

4. SURPRISE

These are complications that prevent your main character from achieving his goal.

5. CRITICAL CHOICE

This is when your MC chooses what path to take and confronts the obstacles.

6. CLIMAX

The critical choice results in the climax, the peak of tension in your story.

7. REVERSAL

Your character is changed in some way.

8. RESOLUTION

The story ends with a satisfactory closure.

This is a good road map to help you generate the higher level of story arc, where you want the story to go, and how things will change.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Story arc and character arc go hand-in-hand. When you've got your story arc in place, it's time to work on your character arc. This is the groundwork that you'll build upon until your plot and character development seamlessly intertwine.

▶ CHAPTER 5 HOW TO CREATE A COMPELLING CHARACTER ARC

You have a story arc, and now you need a character arc. But what exactly is a character arc, and how do you create one?

DEFINING A CHARACTER ARC

The standard definition of a character arc is how your main character changes over the course of your story.

The most common form of character arc is the “Hero’s Journey”. An ordinary person receives a call to adventure and, at first, he or she refuses that call. There’s usually a mentor who helps the hero accept or learn how to attempt the adventure. Think of Yoda in *Star Wars*.

On the Hero’s Journey, the main character goes through many tests, trials, friends and enemies as he or she prepares for the final challenge. The journey culminates in the hero facing down the opposition where he finally acquires his goal, whether it’s a golden chalice or the princess’s hand. There’s a sort of resurrection where the hero comes from the brink of death or destruction to a higher form of being. Then the main character finally returns home—a hero.

THERE’S MORE TO THE CHARACTER ARC

It’s important to note that there’s more out there than just the good guy or gal who’s transformed by the end of the story. Not all characters undergo some major transformation. In some cases, your main character will grow, but not transform.

In fact, most character arcs can be simplified to fit into three different, but sometimes overlapping, categories:

1. The Change Arc (aka the Hero’s Journey)

Probably the most common, or at least the most recognizable. By the end of the tale, the main character has conquered and becomes a usually unlikely hero. Some examples include:

- Katniss Everdeen’s rise from poor hunter to revolutionary hero by the end of *The Hunger Games*.
- Frodo Baggins in *The Fellowship of the Ring* begins as an eccentric little hobbit with an ordinary life in the Shire. No one would have expected him to overcome so many obstacles and throw the ring into Mount Doom.
- Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo. (Remember, the hero is not necessarily a good guy!) Just home from World War II, Michael wants nothing to do with the family business, but an assassination attempt on his father forces him to take action and sends him down the path toward becoming the ruthless leader of New York’s most powerful mafia.



2. The Growth Arc

This is where your main character becomes a better version of who he or she really is. Another version of the Growth Arc is a Shift Arc where the main character shifts his opinion or perspective about a certain situation or a group of people. Examples include:

- Skeeter Phelan and her contingent of African-American maids in *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. They begin the story timid and oppressed, and through the course of the story, they transform into strong women who take a stand and fight for change.
- Elizabeth Gilbert, in her novel/memoir *Eat Pray Love* begins as a woman suffering from the break up of her marriage. Through the course of the book she challenges herself to become the woman she wants to be.
- Briony Tallis in *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. Briony is a good girl who thinks she's protecting her sister and makes an accusation that haunts her the rest of her life. Her life becomes, in effect, atonement for that one moment.

3. The Negative Arc or Fall Arc (aka the Tragedy)

Our main character fails, he or she is doomed, or death occurs. Shakespeare was excellent at writing compelling tragedies.

- The *Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger gives us Henry who can time-travel and change what has or will happen in his life. His wife Clare is left behind to wonder and worry every time he travels. No spoilers, but this is definitely a negative character arc.
- *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding shows us the ugly side of humanity by marooning a group of British school boys on a deserted island who try to govern themselves with disastrous results.
- *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller is the tragic ending of Willy Loman, a salesman surrounded by mixed and unaddressed emotions of his family and himself about what life should be.

There you have the 3 major character arcs. People may—and do—argue that there's more, and perhaps they're right. It can also be argued that there are no original story lines, just variant degrees of the same plot. But we'll leave those arguments for another e-book.



HOW DO YOU CREATE A CHARACTER ARC?

Now you need to figure out which character arc to use in your story. Ask yourself these three questions:

1. Who is your main character at the start of the story, and what are they like?
2. What do you want your character to be like at the end of your story?
3. What events need to happen to make this change come about?

Knowing where your main character starts out and where you want him or her to be by the resolution will dictate the character arc you choose.

MAKE YOUR CHARACTER ARC COMPELLING

It's safe to assume that in real life, most people are striving to do or be someone better. We all want to feel complete and know that we're living up to our potential. That's probably why there are so many self-help apps out there to help you conquer everything from procrastination to eliminating bad habits and even running a marathon (if that's your thing).

Our journeys are all different because we each have a unique vision of what's missing from our lives and what it takes to be complete or whole. And what makes a character arc ultimately compelling is taking the universal truths about a life journey and showing your reader how your main character achieves the very thing we all hope for. Is it love? Or perhaps hero status? Maybe it's ultimate heartbreak. Whatever it is, it's your character arc.

CHARACTER ARC & STORY ARC

As we've seen, you can't have one without the other. Your story arc informs what happens to your MC to induce change and transformation, helps them grow into a stronger version of themselves, or becomes their undoing by the end.

If you don't know where your story is headed, how can you determine how your main character will be affected? And at the same time, if you don't know how your main character is going to change and grow by the end, how can you decide what events to include in your story that will induce that change or growth?

The best stories have an intimately intertwined story arc and character arc that feed off each other. When you've drafted both, set your story arc and character arc next to each other. Check that your story arc affects your main character's inner world, and that your character arc makes sense for your story. If it checks out, you're ready for the next step: the plot thickens.



▶ CHAPTER 6 DRAFTING YOUR PLOT

This is the equivalent of the first “long run” in your training. The work laid down by making your MC three-dimensional, building your story’s world and creating the two arcs will give you the legs to draft your plot.

WHAT IS PLOT?

Plot is what happens to your MC. Things happen and your MC has to deal with or resolve these issues: they receive a mysterious message, they come home to find their spouse in bed with someone else, their house burns down, etc. One thing happens, then another, then another, and each event leads your character further along your story arc toward the climax.

Plot is what gives us action. The story arc, working in tandem with the character arc, gives us the reaction.

Your characters, settings, and scenes are built around your plot, usually organized in a logical manner. Care must be taken, however, to not let plot dominate your story. You can have the most action-packed tale, but without character development, it will fall flat.

WHERE TO START?

You have two choices: 1) you can jump right in and hope for the best; or 2) you can write a plot outline. Which option you choose is determined by your own natural style and what feels comfortable to you. We’re going to cover Option 2 and show you how to outline your key plot points. This example uses a Change Arc, as discussed in the last chapter.

1. Determine your character’s goal.

If you’ve created a compelling three-dimensional main character, you already know what she is like at the beginning of your story, and who you want her to become by the end. What events need to happen to her in order to make that change occur? What does she want to achieve and what problems does she need to solve to reach her goal? This goal is your ending point on your plot outline.

2. What happens if your MC fails?

This is the worst-case scenario that your MC faces if she doesn’t succeed. Take, for example, the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth wants to marry for love or not to marry at all. Her worst-case scenario would be marrying a man she doesn’t love or respect. She does everything possible to avoid that situation, even dismissing Mr. Darcy because she doesn’t believe he’s honorable. This plot point is at the beginning of your story, and your MC’s reaction to the ensuing plot points are all there to let your readers know what the stakes are.

3. What needs to happen for success?

This is a checklist of events that move your MC closer to attainment. Think of these as requirements that must be met to satisfy your reader: the MC’s goal should be both hard to attain and worthy. In *It’s a Wonderful Life*, the MC needs to realize that his life has been worthy just the way he’s lived it. Each event affects or is affected by George Bailey in a certain way, eventually leading him to the realization that his life was indeed already wonderful. Such events are all plot points along the story arc.

4. What hurdles are in the way?

There must be hurdles that threaten to hold your MC back from reaching his or her goal. Intersperse

these hurdles as plot points on your outline. In *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett is faced with what seem like insurmountable hurdles just to keep herself and her beloved Tara intact. These events give your readers the roller coaster of emotions they love.

5. Sacrifices are made.

It can't be easy for your MC to attain their goal, or your reader will be left feeling denied. There need to be sacrifices along your plot outline that make the goal that much more important. Does he or she suffer pain, humiliation, loss of self-respect, or even loss of family? In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen agrees to sacrifice herself to save her sister from being chosen for the Games, setting off the chain of events that eventually lead to revolution.

6. Small wins along the way.

It also can't all be about the obstacles and the hurdles. Your MC must have some smaller wins along the way to keep him or her moving towards their goal. These should balance, to some extent, the sacrifices that are made.

EXAMPLES OF PLOTTING

It's difficult to show how to plot without getting into specifics, so here are three famous stories we've plotted to give you an idea of what's needed at this stage. *Note: Spoilers ahead.*

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

1 George Bailey lives his entire life in Bedford Falls, giving of himself to everyone in town through the family's building and loan company.

2 George sacrifices his dreams and goals for the future to stay home and keep the old building and loan operational, like when he uses his honeymoon money to keep the company solvent instead of traveling.

3 On Christmas Eve, Uncle Billy loses an \$8,000 deposit, and the bank examiner notices the missing money. George fears he will lose the business and go to jail.

4 George, in the depths of despair, considers suicide and wishes he'd never been born.

5 His wish is granted by Clarence, an angel brought down to help George Bailey.

6 Clarence shows George how many lives he touched and changed along the way and how dark the future would have been had he not been born.

7 George realizes that it was, in fact, a wonderful life, and returns to his home to embrace his family.

8 The townspeople gather at George's house and donate their hard-earned money to make up the \$8,000 difference to the bank examiner's satisfaction.



THE HUNGER GAMES

1 Katniss Everdeen lives in a dystopian future nation called Panem with her mother and her sister, Prim.

2 Panem has 12 poor districts plus the opulent Capitol, and each year, to remember the past rebellion, two young people are chosen from each district by lottery to compete to the death in the Hunger Games.

3 Prim, who is only 12, is chosen as the female representative from their district along with Peeta Mellark, with whom Katniss has a shared past. To save

Prim, Katniss volunteers to go in her place and is sent to the Capitol with Peeta for training.

4 When the 24 contestants are released in the arena, all of Panem watches as they fight for their lives. The games can only finish when all representatives but one are dead.

5 Katniss forms an alliance with Rue, a young girl from District 11. When Rue is killed, Panem citizens across the districts notice Katniss's kindness and begin rooting for her.

6 As a strategic move, Katniss begins to play up a romance with Peeta and the districts support her even more, seeing them as doomed lovers.

7 When Katniss and Peeta are the last remaining contestants, Katniss devises a plan that, while risky, will save both their lives.

8 Katniss and Peeta are both spared, and they return home as heroes to the nation, but their rebellion has made them enemies of the government.

GONE WITH THE WIND

1 Beautiful and spoiled, Scarlett O'Hara is a young belle of the ball at the start of the American Civil War.

2 She is in love with Ashley Wilkes, but Ashley asks his cousin Melanie to marry him.

3 Scarlett pleads with Ashley in private and doesn't know Rhett Butler hears everything.

4 When Ashley marries Melanie, Scarlett impulsively marries Melanie's younger brother, who is subsequently killed in the war.

5 As everyone has gone off to war and Atlanta is burning, Scarlett decides to flee back to her family's plantation, Tara.

6 Scarlett is a strong woman, using her intelligence to keep Tara afloat and take care of

those she loves. She'll even marry Rhett Butler to save her family home and live the life she once enjoyed.

7 When Melanie dies, Scarlett sees that Ashley only ever loved Melanie, and she realizes that she actually loves her husband, Rhett.

8 It's too late, though, and Rhett leaves Scarlett—with those famous last words.

WHAT MAKES A STRONG PLOT?

The goal needs to mean a lot to the MC and the supporting characters. If the problem facing your MC is trivial, your reader won't get excited about it.



Make sure your MC resolves the conflict on her own. Don't have someone else come in to save the day, and don't rely on an act of nature to tidily wrap things up. Your readers want to see your MC solve her problem herself.

When you outline your plot, remember that it's just a skeleton. It's up to you to flesh out that skeleton and make it a three-dimensional living, breathing opus. Each of our bodies is comprised of a skeleton that looks very similar to others. It's when you flesh out our frames with muscles, sinews, hair, and skin that we take on our individual appearances. Outlining in this manner won't stifle your creativity; instead, it helps you maintain a strong plot throughout.

Finally, a powerful resolution is one that leaves your reader feeling some strong emotion at the end. Tying up all the loose ends also makes for a powerful resolution that won't leave your reader dangling and upset.

TAKE-AWAYS

Your plot outline will be as individual as you are. It's merely something to give you a structure on which to build. It's the foundation from which your creative juices can spring forth. The outline is not meant to be rigid, but merely a pliable frame holding up the walls of your world.

There are many other essentials that go into a good plot, like sub-plots and multiple points of view, that we'll cover in upcoming chapters.



▶ CHAPTER 7 HOW CHARACTERS TRANSFORM

One of the easiest ways to help your character transform by the end of your novel is to map it out using the 9 Enneagram “Levels of Development”. Let’s dive deep into how that works.

CHANGE: IT’S HUMAN NATURE

Your characters have to change for your story to be both believable and satisfying to your readers. The best way to create relatable characters with whom your readers empathize is to understand how human nature can change over time. And one way to do that is by using Enneagram.

SO HOW DOES CHANGE HAPPEN?

The Enneagram details 9 internal levels of development where your main character will find him or herself at any point in time. A person’s personality isn’t static, meaning that it fluctuates depending on whether they are under duress or some good fortune happens. Each of these 9 levels of development represents a major paradigm shift in awareness, meaning your main character changes—for better or worse.

Have a look at the different levels below and see if you can place your main character(s) at the beginning of your story and where you want them to be at the end.

The key is to make your MC use his or her personality traits to climb from their initial “developmental level” to a higher one (in the case of a successful denouement) or sink to a lower one (in the case of a tragic ending). The character arc is a moral arc, and your character changes in a moral direction—towards good (liberation) or evil (pathological destructiveness).

THE 9 ENNEAGRAM LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT

LEVEL 1: Liberation. This is the highest level of development a person can reach. Your main character is the perfect expression of who he or she is meant to be. Liberation is the end of the journey of human development.

LEVEL 2: Capable, but fearful. There’s something holding your main character back from reaching liberation. It’s an unmet desire or a fear they’re holding onto. Once they deal with this anxiety, they can move on to Level 1.

LEVEL 3: Functioning Member of Society. Characters at Level 3 are functioning in society, but not yet capable. They have secondary fears and desires in addition to their main fear or desire that are holding them back from moving up to the next level.

These first 3 levels are the more virtuous stages of human development. The stages that come after are starting to slide to the dark side.

LEVEL 4: Imbalanced. While still on the side of morality, an imbalanced main character has given into a temptation that’s unhealthy. They’re not quite as self-aware as they should be about their flaws because they’ve violated their own self-interests.

LEVEL 5: Manipulative. This level of development has your character manipulating or controlling their world and others to try to get their basic desires met. They've created some hefty defense mechanisms that come in conflict with others around them.

LEVEL 6: Over-compensating. There's just something off-kilter about this character. They're fairly self-centered and exhibit some extreme behavior in an attempt to get their needs met. Anxieties and aggressions are acted out in unhealthy ways at this level.

The last three levels are when your MC has turned completely to the dark side. Think villainous.

LEVEL 7: Violation. This level marks a major shift. Your character is suffering from a major life crisis or perhaps grew up in an abusive home. They must protect themselves at any cost, which results in serious, unhealthy conflict with others. They're not quite pathological yet, though.

LEVEL 8: Obsessive/compulsive. Your character is trying to escape reality at this point rather than surrender to deep anxiety. They're frankly delusional. Think of the DSM's description of personality disorders. That type of character falls into this level of development.

LEVEL 9: Pathological. This is the bottom rung. This character is violent, destructive, and completely out of touch with reality. The willful destruction they cause is an effort to create distance from their enormous pain and anxiety.

MAKE YOUR CHARACTERS MOVE UP OR DOWN LEVELS

It's difficult for characters to move up to a higher development level. And characters can't skip levels if you want them to be believable. No one jumps from violence to enlightenment without doing the emotional and intellectual work to get there. Just as no one falls from a happy joyous life to a murderous rampage without something major happening.

If your main character is a tragic hero like Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, we want to see how he devolves from level to level. We want to experience that fall with him, so you should clearly show each stage of his descent.

Your reader needs to understand how your main character has had that "paradigm shift" in his or her awareness in order to believe it and maybe even empathize with it.

LITERARY EXAMPLES

Let's use Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I place Scout on a Level 3 or 4 in development. She clearly violates her own self-interests at times, especially in dealing with other kids her age. I see her gradually work her way up to Level 2 as she learns how to deal with people. At the culmination of the book, Scout takes a great leap to Level 1, Liberation. She understands her true, essential nature. She is who she is, and has a great handle on who the people around her are, too. Quite a successful character change from Scout—and we're left satisfied with the end.

Jay Gatsby is a main character who sinks a few levels during the course of *The Great Gatsby*. In the course of trying to satisfy his ultimate desire of being with Daisy, Gatsby does some shady things and creates a magical world that he thinks will draw Daisy in. I see Gatsby sliding from Imbalanced to Manipulative and finally to Over-Compensating by the end of the novel.

TAKE-AWAYS

You can have the most amazing storyline with adventure and action and shocking twists and turns, but if your reader doesn't fall for your main character, your novel won't take off. Create the best possible character you can and have him or her move up or down the developmental levels.

Readers want to see characters rise above or fall. If you can weave that all together with your narrative arc, you'll write an incredibly compelling and engaging story that readers won't want to put down.



▶ CHAPTER 8 HOW TO USE SUBPLOTS TO BRING YOUR WHOLE STORY TOGETHER

Just like in real life, your characters will have more than one thing demanding their time and attention. Romances, family life, work concerns, health issues, friendships, etc. These additional plot lines are subplots that give your story depth and help keep it moving.

And as with your main plot, all subplots should follow a narrative arc of conflict, crisis, and resolution, usually wrapped up before the main plot's climax.

Subplots can be what's happening to secondary characters or an internal conflict your main character is facing in addition to the main conflict of your story. The key to an effective subplot is how you work it into the main plot.

TYPES OF SUBPLOTS

There are a lot of ways to create subplots. We'll cover three main types here:

Mirror

The mirror subplot happens when you create a secondary conflict that mirrors the main conflict, but usually doesn't actually match it. For example, a mirror subplot to a romance novel could be a secondary character—say your main character's best friend—who also falls in love, but it doesn't turn out as nicely for her at the end. Your main character might learn something through this subplot that helps her through her own conflict.

Contrast

This is where you show the opposite progress or growth from the main plot. You could give your main character a weakness that she has to overcome and include the same or similar weakness in a secondary character. That's where the plots diverge, though. Your secondary character's contrasting subplot would show her refusing to grow or change, which helps your main character see her own stagnation and break through it.

Complications

Subplots that complicate things for your main character are great ways to always keep your reader turning the pages. Say your main character has an important task to complete for the story's main conflict. Someone can throw a monkey wrench into your story and make things near impossible for your main character. Complicating subplots happen outside of the main plot, but still affect the trajectory your character follows to the climax.

THE KEY TO MAKING IT ALL WORK

Your subplots must all be connected. A subplot that doesn't have any bearing on or effect to the final denouement in your story should be cut. It's much like weaving an intricate cloth together from separate strands of thread. The ending will create a comprehensive story made up of many subplots that all tie together at the end.

Let's look at a subplot in practice. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you have the mystery of Boo Radley that consumes Scout, Jem, and Dill's attention during the summers. This subplot shows up time and again throughout the narrative to fuel your curiosity. There's the intriguing case of the trinkets that show up in the knothole in the tree, and the unidentified person who put the blanket around Scout's shoulders at the fire. Just who is Boo? And how scary crazy is he? This subplot ties in nicely at the end of the book when Scout finally realizes that sympathy and understanding are the keys to life rather than hatred and prejudice.

Think about some of your favorite books and analyze their subplots. A subplot could be constructed around a love interest for your MC or an internal conflict she must overcome. You can have a subplot that creates empathy for your MC by showing his vulnerability or a deep-seated desire that he's not even aware of. There can be mystery subplots, coming-of-age subplots, even a vendetta subplot. The sky is the limit.

HOW MANY SUBPLOTS SHOULD YOU HAVE?

There's no hard and fast rule about the number of subplots that will work, but as you can imagine, having too many subplots can create confusion for your reader and headaches for you. A good rule of thumb is to have your main conflict, an inner conflict, and a handful of subplots.

The easiest way to create your subplots is to follow the same steps you took for the main plot (see Chapters 4 and 6). The difference is that your subplots will be simpler and have fewer steps to take for resolution. In fact, you can introduce a subplot and have it resolved in a few chapters, or you can thread a subplot throughout until the end.

TAKE-AWAYS

Don't let your subplots hijack your main plot. If you find a subplot taking over, think about whether it should actually have a life of its own. Maybe it's the premise for your next story.

Just like your main plot, subplots shouldn't be arbitrarily thrown in without careful thought and development. And woe unto you who does not wrap up a subplot by the end. If a subplot shows up at the beginning of your story, make sure it's resolved—for better or worse—if you want a satisfied reader.

Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.

Anton Chekhov



▶ CHAPTER 9 AVOID THESE PLOT PITFALLS

We're going to change it up for this chapter and talk about what NOT to do. After all, breaking bad habits during training is just as essential as forming good ones.

Sometimes it's hard to see plot problems while you're writing and it's only when you go back and re-read it that you notice the holes. This can send some writers into a downward spiral of frustration and negative self-talk.

But if you foresee this at the planning stage, you won't need to go through it during the revision stage. So take a rest at this point. Look back over what you've done so far, particularly your plots and subplots, and make sure you're avoiding the following pitfalls.

THE PLOT IS UNORIGINAL

We've all been there: you hit upon a brilliant plot idea, share it with a friend and they say, "Oh, it sounds just like that film I saw last week".

Since most stories follow a common story arc, it's hard to have a truly original story. But what makes a story different from what's already been done is your take on it. What elements will you add that are your own? Where in the traditional narrative arc does it take an unexpected turn? Readers like to be surprised. If you're trying too hard to fit into someone else's mold of what makes for a good story, you've not given yourself enough freedom to be you.

An easy way to separate the boring, unoriginal pieces from the new and shiny is to sit down with your plot outline, story arc, character arc and a red pen. Read through each and jot a note in the margin if you've read it before in someone else's work or if you've seen it in a movie. And then have a trusted second person go through and mark what she thinks are unoriginal bits.

Now it's time for some major brainstorming. Choose a problem area that you marked as unoriginal, and use a mind map to come up with alternate ideas that will take your characters away from what's already been done and into some new territory. Play the "what if" game. What if the main character had a childhood crush on the antagonist?

What if there's suddenly a gun in this scene? What if the next door neighbor is a con man? Or go even further—what if one of the main characters dies?

This tactic also works well if you have a lackluster character who is central to the action. Start brainstorming ideas for strange obsessions this character can have that will affect the outcome of your story.

The best part about this exercise is that it's great fun to let your imagination run free. Imagine how you'll pique the interest of your reader when that kangaroo shows up with a gun in its pouch. Or maybe not...

“There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages.”

Mark Twain

TOO MUCH ACTION IS EXHAUSTING

On the flip side, you can actually have too much action. You don't want your readers to gallop through your story. When you get into the main writing phase, make sure you give your readers a moment to catch their breath in between action scenes. Think about your favorite action movie. The main character isn't always fighting the bad guys; sometimes she's quietly contemplating her next move or examining her feelings.

You need these quiet scenes between the action to help you develop your characters. Readers learn about the main character(s) by their actions and also by their thoughts. The conversations your characters have are just as important as what they do to thwart the antagonist. If you don't feel like you know and understand your characters and their motivations, you won't care if they win or lose.

You also need a way to show your character's flaws—warts and all. You can't do that with non-stop action. Take another look at your story arc. Is your plot too shallow? Are you too caught up in the action and the magnificent symbolism you've created? Have you included scenes that will get your character's inner turmoil across to your reader?

Let depth of character serve to give your reader a rest between action scenes.

TOO MANY SUBPLOTS OBFUSCATE THE REAL ISSUE

If you're having a hard time keeping up with all the subplots as you're writing, imagine how difficult it will be for your reader. This is when it's time to "kill your darlings" as Faulkner said.

Again turn to your red pen. If a character with a subplot isn't absolutely vital to the denouement, use that red pen. Delete at will. Not all characters need to have intricate character arcs. Some can be reassuringly one or two dimensional and still serve a purpose in your story.

This is when you test the mettle of your strength as a writer. You may be seriously in love with these characters. How can you possibly cut something that's part of you?

Think of it this way: You're not killing your darling; you're just moving her to a new novel as the main character.

Voila! Problem solved. New novel started.

AN UNSATISFYING END: READERS KNOW EXACTLY WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN

This may be a result of a few things. Have you chosen a plot premise that's been done to death? If you follow a traditional story arc too closely, then your reader will be able to predict exactly what will happen from the very first chapter. Think of ways to add unpredictability so that your reader is compelled to keep reading to see what will happen next.

Have you given away the answer too soon? If you've planted blatant clues all along that lead to an obvious ending, your reader won't feel worried about the outcome. Whereas, if your reader feels concerned for your characters, and can't figure out what the bad guy is up to, they will keep turning pages. So don't show your reader everything that your antagonist does. Instead use foreshadowing to hint at what he or she might do. For example, don't show your antagonist slipping a leash around the neck of your main character's beloved pet; show him at the store buying dog biscuits. Let the reader connect the dots and figure out that he's up to no good.

There are so many books that leave the reader breathless by ending in an unexpected way. Think of *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John

Irving, and so many more. Most readers didn't see those endings coming and so they had a strong emotional reaction when everything was revealed.

TAKE-AWAYS

Revisions are hard, especially plot revisions. That doesn't mean they can't be done. It will take some time, however. Don't give up just yet.

There's one key idea you should take away from this: **every plot problem has a solution.**



▶ CHAPTER 10 CHOOSING YOUR POV - IT'S NOT AS EASY AS YOU THINK

What is POV? It stands for Point of View, and it's one of the most important aspects of your story that must be decided before putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard).

Sometimes the POV just comes to you. You know exactly who would tell the story. Other times, you have a cast of interesting characters in your head, and it's a little more difficult to decide.

Here are a few suggestions to help you choose the best POV for your story.

FIRST PERSON – “ME, MYSELF, AND I”

With first person POV, everything is told intimately from the viewpoint of a character, usually your protagonist. Using “I” to show readers what this character sees and thinks is the easiest way to tell a story that uses a distinct, quirky voice.

This is the best way to show the story from one person's point of view because you have an individual person telling you her story directly in her own words.

The limitations of first person POV, however, restrict you to only describing what one character sees, thinks, and feels, and sometimes that narrator can be unreliable. But, if you want to show your main character facing down a major crisis at your climax, seeing the story through his or her eyes can be very powerful.

Consider, for example, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger or *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, both fascinating reads with flawed main characters struggling with their strong inner demons. Each novel delves deep into the off-kilter mindset of someone struggling with their mental health. You can't trust what the main character is thinking because they're both out of touch with reality. Compare that with the intimacy you get when reading Scout's view of things in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Scout is very grounded in her life, her relationships, and her way of viewing the world. These are excellent examples of very different uses of first person POV.

THIRD PERSON OMNISCIENT – “HE, SHE”

You can throw everything you want at your reader with third person omniscient because you, as the narrator, have a God's-eye view of everything that's happening in the story. This is a great POV to use when you have multiple characters and plot lines to follow. If you want your reader to be able to watch everything unfold, this is the best POV to use.

Third person omniscient is, however, emotionally distant from the story. Because you're constantly jumping around different characters and their story arcs, it's hard for your reader to get emotionally involved with your characters. However, if your book is highly plot-driven rather than character-driven, this might be the best POV for you.

An excellent example of third person omniscient POV is Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. The reader sees everything that is happening in the story and gets a vivid lesson in politics and society in France's history. Similarly, in *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, you know everything that's going on with all the characters in Anne's small world. The narrator sometimes even shows affection for or mocks the characters.

THIRD PERSON LIMITED – STILL “HE, SHE”

Grammatically speaking, this uses “he” and “she” just like the omniscient POV, but follows one character's



viewpoint throughout the entire novel. This means your reader sees only what the main character sees and learns things at the same time the main character does. You can show what your main character thinks, feels, and sees to close the emotional distance between your reader and the main character.

The drawback with third person limited POV is that you can only follow one character. Showing other characters' thoughts and feelings is a no-no. However, if you have a single character who experiences all of your major plot points, this is the best POV for you to use.

Examples of the third person limited POV are the Harry Potter novels. The reader sees everything that's going on, but is limited to Harry's point of view. We're surprised when Harry is surprised, and we find out the resolution at the ending when Harry does. Another fantastic example of third person limited is Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. We know what's going on in Gregor's mind as he is transformed and are limited to his point of view in everything that happens in the story.

SECOND PERSON – “YOU”

This is one of the least used POVs in literature because it places the reader in the hot seat and is hard to manage for a full length novel. It's used by experimental literature to try out new styles of writing because in the wrong hands, it just feels gimmicky.

A prime example of second person POV that's carried off nicely is the Choose Your Own Adventure books. Written completely in second person, these books put the reader in the driver's seat and let him or her actually choose how the story will end.

CRAFTING MULTIPLE POVS

Writing from multiple POVs can be frustrating and confusing for readers if not handled well, so you need to have a very good reason for using them. But done well, multiple POVs can create a rich, layered story that provides the reader with an in-depth and complex understanding.

Here are our tips on how to craft a story using multiple POVs:

Decide why you need multiple POVs.

It should really be about the story you want to tell. Make sure the story needs multiple POVs before you start writing. Two excellent examples of the need for multiple POVs are *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn and *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult. In both cases the story depends on conflicting perspectives of multiple characters who experience the same situations in markedly different ways.

Decide what's driving your plot.

You have two options with multiple POVs and plot. One, you can write about a single set of events from different perspectives, or two, you can use several sets of events that specifically move from place to place and character to character without a lot of overlap. Figure out which option works best for the story you want to tell.

Decide which POV is best for each chapter or scene.

Not every scene about a main character needs to be in his or her POV. Sometimes it's more powerful to show the scene from another POV so your reader experiences the consequences of an action rather than the action itself. *A Game of Thrones* is a great novel to study if you want to learn more about scene decision-making.

Reduce your narrative or story arc to the minimum viable story you can tell.

This will seriously save you countless headaches during revisions. Trying to keep all of the POVs and story threads in harmony is difficult. Don't make things more complicated than they need to be. And remember, it's important to tie up all loose ends by the end of your story.

MULTIPLE POV IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

A few words of caution are needed. Multiple POV is hard work, and in the hands of an inexperienced writer can become an unwieldy stumbling block that will get your manuscript rejected by every agent and publisher alike.

So, when you're working with multiple POV:

Give each POV character a clearly distinct voice.

Use different speech patterns, different education levels and socio-economic backgrounds. Distinguish each character by using a different dominant sense for each.

Create distinct character arcs for each POV character.

This includes identifying the goals, stakes, and pitfalls, and how those move the story forward.

Don't write the same scene from multiple POVs.

You'll bore your reader. Choose which character has the most at stake and use that POV for the scene. The only exception is if two characters interpret the same events in a scene in markedly different ways, leading to a major misunderstanding that's key to your story.

Make sure to fully identify which POV you're using.

If you change POVs when you change scenes, you need to somehow ground your reader as soon as the switch takes place. Some writers will use the character's name as the chapter title to help readers know whose head they are in.

HOW MANY POVS SHOULD YOU HAVE?

There's no hard and fast rule about how many POVs you should limit yourself to. Some experts and writing coaches will tell you no more than 3 to 5 POVs. But it's your story to tell, so you should decide who tells it and how.

TAKE-AWAYS

Before you start experimenting with POV, get comfortable with the basics. Read works by authors who use different POVs with great success to understand how each POV changes the narrative arc of the novel. Some great novels that use multiple POVs include *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins, *A Game of Thrones* by George R. R. Martin, and *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr.

POV is a matter of choice, but one that affects every part of your story or novel. Fitzgerald had to rewrite *The Great Gatsby* because he initially wrote it in Gatsby's voice. He decided it would be much more powerful coming from Nick's more naïve point of view. Imagine that masterpiece with a different point of view. Definitely not as powerful.

▶ CHAPTER 11 CREATING COMPELLING & EVOCATIVE SCENES

If you have taken the time to really follow the first 10 steps, your novel will be taking shape. Now to pull everything together and think about how you'll create compelling and evocative scenes that make your readers keep turning the pages.

WHAT ARE SCENES?

Scenes are the rising and falling action, and the soft moments in between, that move your story forward. They have a couple of basic purposes:

- 1. They establish time and place.** They give the reader a marker on where and when things are happening.
- 2. They help develop character.** Even if the scene is pure action, you learn about the character's motivations by his or her decisions, choices, and conduct.
- 3. They let characters set goals.** Without goals to achieve, characters have no reason to act or emote. Readers want to know what's at stake.
- 4. They allow the action to rise or fall.** This movement is what carries your reader forward.
- 5. They let you crank up the conflict.** Without conflict, you won't have tension. And without tension, your story is boring.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD SCENE

Individual scenes have a similar structure to your story arc. You want to have scenes full of action separated by scenes where your characters reflect and come to a decision or set a new goal.

Each action scene should be structured around a central goal that your character is striving for, involve some kind of conflict along the way that ratchets up the tension, and conclude with a setback or disaster that moves your main character further away from attaining her goal.

Follow each action scene with a breather scene that allows your character to react to what happened in the previous scene. Raise the stakes by creating a dilemma he or she now faces, wherein both possible outcomes have unforeseen negative consequences.

Good scenes show the changing emotional landscape that your character journeys through. They may start the scene happy and full of joy and end the scene crestfallen and morose. Your character's mood should change by the end of your scene, one way or another.

Effective scenes tie into the overarching theme of your story. When you use details in your scenes that reflect and support the significance of what you want your readers to take away at the end, you'll create meaning and depth.

Take, for example, the book *The Martian* by Andy Weir. An overall thematic tone of perseverance throughout is played out in each scene. Just when you think things can't get worse for Mark Watney, the main character, disaster strikes. He struggles emotionally with all of these setbacks, but each time, he finally settles down and starts to problem solve. The take-away from the book and the film is that everything essentially boils down to solving one problem at a time.



HOW TO CREATE SCENES

How you begin a scene and how you end it is what grabs your reader's attention. You want to change up how you begin and end your scenes so they don't appear formulaic.

HERE ARE A FEW IDEAS FOR STARTING YOUR SCENE:

START WITH ACTION

This is always a great attention-grabber and helps move your reader along.

BEGIN WITH A SHORT NARRATIVE

You can actually slow down the pace by telling a little bit to set the scene instead of showing. This is particularly helpful if you have an interesting setting you want to introduce to your reader.

SHOW YOUR CHARACTER'S INNER THOUGHTS

This is a great way to reveal your character's intentions that can't be shown through action.

START WITH DIALOGUE

This is another great way to instantly engage your reader and move your story forward.

NOW FOR WAYS TO END A SCENE:

CLIFFHANGERS

This is the classic scene ending that keeps readers up all night to see what happens next.

NEW INFORMATION

Drop the bomb and bring out a new piece of information at the end of your scene. Or better yet, promise to reveal new information next.

EMOTIONAL CONFUSION

Leave your character twisting in the wind emotionally.

AN EPIPHANY

Make it something unforeseen that changes the story going forward.

CREATIVE WAYS TO PLOT YOUR SCENES

If you're a planner, you might want to outline your scenes to make sure they include all of the necessary elements and to see how they work over the course of your chapters.

A more fun way to approach scenes is by visualizing them. We recommend these methods:

Storyboarding

Comic book writers and film creators use storyboards as a visual way to see how the story is moving forward. Even if you can't draw, you can still make stick figures that represent your characters and give a rough idea of what they're doing in each scene. If you put each scene on a separate piece of paper, you can easily move the scenes around until you find an order that's compelling and engaging.

Index cards

This is another visual method, but instead of drawing pictures, you use a sentence or two on each index card to describe the scene. You can also capture the purpose of each scene, such as whether it advances the plot or develops your characters. You could color-code your index cards by type of scene (e.g. red for an action scene; yellow for a breather scene) and use that to make sure your pacing is rising and falling.



Mind mapping

A high-tech way to capture your scene ideas is to use a mind mapping computer program like Mindmeister or Mind42 that lets you start with the reason for your scene in the middle. From there, you brainstorm the crucial elements for a good scene like the emotional mood, how the character changes, conflicts that arise, and what happens next.

If you're not a planner and just like to sit at the computer and let the words flow, you can always use these methods during the editing process to help you analyze each scene to make sure it includes the essential elements and to ensure it moves your story forward.

TAKE-AWAYS

Scenes are usually contained in chapters or can include a visual break of line space between the ending of one scene and the beginning of the next. Like your story, a scene needs a beginning with a hook, a middle, and an end.

What's most important to remember is that each scene has a responsibility to move your plot forward in a way that evokes strong emotion in your reader and compels him or her to keep turning the pages. Make your scene as alluring as possible.



▶ CHAPTER 12 TYPES OF CONFLICT

What book are you reading right now? It's bound to have some type of conflict involving the characters, otherwise you'd have set it aside long before now.

When you're telling your own story, you need to choose your conflict wisely so that you can keep your reader engaged throughout.

There are two main types of conflict: internal and external. And you should weave both throughout your narrative arc to create a sense of drama.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Internal

Your basic internal conflict is **Person vs. Self**. This is when your main character battles her own inner demons. Maybe she's struggling with a moral dilemma like Shakespeare's Hamlet, or fighting against her own vices and foils, or striving to become a better person like Hugo's Jean Valjean. Your main character must have some inner turmoil that's causing her emotional pain. Internal conflict adds a unique tension to your story.

Another kind of internal conflict is **Person vs. Fate/God**. In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo struggles to fulfill his destiny to destroy the ring. This internal struggle is sometimes lumped together with Person vs. Self because it can be argued that Fate or God is really an internal struggle with yourself to accept or reject your own fate.

External

Person vs. Person is the most common type of external conflict. This is your simple protagonist versus antagonist where only one person will win. Every superhero movie you see follows this conflict type—the hero combats the evil villain and wins to save the world. Heroes and their villains can even be alter egos of each other for an interesting twist (no examples here for spoiler reasons!).

Person vs. Society is an external conflict that sets your protagonist against an institution, tradition, law, or other type of societal construct. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is an excellent example where Atticus Finch stands up to racist citizens in town when he defends an innocent black man. And consider Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, a manifesto of capitalism.

Person vs. Nature pits your protagonist against some form or force of nature. Think of *Moby Dick*, Melville's epic battle of Man vs. Whale, or Pi's struggle to survive while trapped in a boat with a tiger in Martel's *Life of Pi*. This can also include supernatural forces like in Stephen King's *Dreamcatcher*.

One final external conflict is **Person vs. Technology**. As humans, we have an innate skepticism about technology and where it will eventually lead. Can man create an artificial intelligence that will someday take over the world and spell doom for all of us? Think of Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Asimov's *I, Robot*.

COMBINING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONFLICTS

The movie *Twister* has a lot of internal and external conflict, driving the action-packed film. You have Jo's inner conflict of dealing with her father being swept away in a tornado when she was little and her crumbling marriage with the love of her life, Bill, who wants a divorce so he can marry another woman. She battles against the forces of nature trying to learn more about tornadoes and how to predict their devastation, all the while trying to understand how fate chooses one house to be

demolished by a tornado while the house next door is left alone.

The more types of conflict your MC can struggle with, the more she can grow and change. And it's this change that gives your reader the satisfying conclusion.

Most importantly: **You must tie the conflict directly to your main character.**

Conflict must encompass your MC to produce tension.

Consider the book *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. Skeeter is surprised and disturbed by the stories of the African-American women who are hired help in the finer homes of her hometown. In the end, she finds out how their stories directly intertwine with hers when she discovers what happened to her own family's maid, whom she loved like a second mother.

There's no need to state your conflicts explicitly; your reader will figure it out. But as the writer, you need to identify your conflicts, or themes, so that you can apply them as you write. Each scene must be tied somehow to the basic conflicts you've chosen for your work and must move that conflict forward to resolution.

WAYS TO CRANK UP THE CONFLICT

Let your characters fail.

Big or small objectives—it doesn't matter. Failure keeps your reader wanting to know what happens next. How is your MC going to deal with the latest set-back? Consider how many superhero movies start with someone close to the main character getting hurt or killed. Failure is an excellent motivator.

Give your characters strong opinions.

The best example of this is Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*. Miss Bennett and Mr. Darcy both have very strong opinions about how they perceive the other, and they're definitely not flattering. It works to crank up the tension between the two.

Pick the worst time.

Something's going to happen to your MC, right? Pick the absolute worst time for it to happen. Your MC is starting her dream job on Monday, but Sunday night, her young child is rushed to the hospital with a life-threatening disease. If your MC is getting married to the love of his life and his fiancé suddenly has second thoughts, make it happen at the altar.

Hit below the belt.

We always hurt the ones we love. And we know how to do it because we know their softest parts to aim for. How can you use what you know about your MC for a low blow that takes her feet out from under her?

Create an impossible choice.

If you've read William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, you understand this suggestion. When your MC has to make an impossible choice, something inherently changes inside and outside their character. This will keep your readers hooked.

Create small annoyances.

Your heroine is rushing to the hospital to be at the side of her dying mother, but she's stuck in stopped traffic as a funeral procession drives slowly by or she has locked herself out of her house. Make your MC have a bad day where everything that can go wrong does.

Keep secrets.

Everyone has secrets. You can have someone in your story keep an important secret from your MC that eventually has dire consequences. Even better, keep the secret to yourself, only dropping hints along the way, and use it to create a shocking twist at the end.

TAKE-AWAYS

Readers aren't interested in the main character living a happy, contented life. They want to see someone triumph (or not) over conflicts. The more unpredictable your story will be depends on how varied your conflicts are. So drop a bomb. Put a gun in someone's hand. Add a flesh-eating disease. Go big.

To create the perfect villain—whether it's man, nature or society—figure out your main character's values. Then, take those values and twist them into something hideous and assign the result to a conflict type.

And there's never been a story rejected for too much conflict—only not enough.



▶ CHAPTER 13 USING TITILLATING & CAPTIVATING DIALOGUE

It's useful to think about how your characters are going to interact with each other before you start on that first draft.

Dialogue can be about much more than just the words on the page. Good authors use it to build tension and subtly set the tone of each interaction. The words their characters choose say so much more than just their lexical meaning.

Let's pause to consider how you can use dialogue to strengthen your characters and move your story forward.

CREATE POWER DYNAMICS

Dialogue is one of the best ways to create power dynamics between your characters. When one character is using aggressive language and the other is backing down, it's easy to get a sense of the relationship. A passive-aggressive comment is an effective way to get across dislike or distrust. Or, having one character using a formal name while the other uses an informal name is a subtle way of letting your reader know who holds the power in that relationship.

- "Did you hear me, Tony?"
- "Yes, Mrs Montgomery."

Your readers will be able to learn so much more based on the choice of language you employ in dialogue. Is it dismissive, aggressive or timid? Are they words that you would use when you are feeling comfortable or feeling awkward? Are they demanding words or appeasing words? Does one character interrupt or speak over the other? All of these give your readers clues about the power dynamic between your characters and help them to read between your lines.

INDICATE SOCIAL OR GEOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

Many stories are dependent on readers getting a clear understanding of the class differences between their characters. Using linguistics is one way to get those differences across. Writers must be careful not to fall into negative stereotypes, but the reality is that a kid who grew up in a dysfunctional poverty-stricken Detroit family will speak differently to a kid who grew up in a dysfunctional wealthy Connecticut family. Don't overplay this. Not every word needs to be phonetic or it will sound like a caricature and distract from the content, but a few dialectic words here and there keep the character's background at the front of your reader's mind.

Likewise, if one of your characters is meant to be from England, then their dialogue should reflect the way that British people speak. Again, be careful here. Not all Brits actually say things like "Core blimey, Guvnor, I'm knackered!" but they will call the trunk of the car the boot and refer to their cell phones as mobile phones. Your writing should reflect these differences if it is to feel real.

ILLUSTRATE DECEPTION OR MANIPULATION

We love it when we have insider knowledge about a character's inner workings and they conflict with what he or she says or does. When you know that the man luring the woman to his home is a serial killer, but all she hears is "Would you like to come back to my place and have a look at those photos I was telling you about?", it gives you a thrill. You want to step into the story and yell "Don't go! He's not really a photographer!"

In life, we all manipulate and deceive at some level (though usually not in such a murderous way!). If the reader knows that Jim doesn't want to go to the party for fear of seeing his ex, but he calls and says that the babysitter cancelled, then the reader is in on the deception. A good writer will be able to persuade their reader that this deception is good or bad, depending on where they want the story to go. Should we feel sorry for Jim for being too anxious? Or should we feel angry at him for telling the lie? Either way, the reader has seen through the facade and learned something about Jim's agenda and his vulnerability.

INDICATE SARCASM OR INNUENDO

Having your dialogue contrast with your description is a great way to indicate a second meaning to your reader.

- She rolled her eyes and picked up her wallet. "Fine then, let's go. This should be a barrel of laughs."
- One eyebrow lifted and a smarmy smile crossed his face. "Oh yeah, baby, I'll load your dishwasher all right!"

Sarcasm is useful in dialogue; it can illustrate either a joke or an insult. It is frequently used when speaking, but much more difficult to get across on the page—yet it can add a level of realism to your writing that will engage your reader.

GIVE CLUES OR HIDDEN AGENDAS

Dialogue is a great way to foreshadow. If a conversation is about searching for a lost child and you plant a small, seemingly irrelevant seed that a certain character might have a different reason for wanting to find the child, your reader will remember it and feel on the inside track when you reveal the reason. If a sales clerk states that he has never been to a certain bar in Chapter 3, but it's revealed in Chapter 7 that he used to work there, that tells the reader he is not trustworthy. Perhaps a character is avoiding questions (or, conversely, she is asking too many questions) and steering dialogue in a certain direction. These puzzle pieces will be stored away by your reader until eventually a picture is formed in their mind's eye.

TAKE-AWAYS

Writing dialogue is a difficult skill to master. It must be extensive enough to allow your characters to engage with one another in a way that feels real and allows for relationships to form, but is limited enough that the reader won't get bored. In real life, dialogue includes a great deal of tedious fluff:

- "Did you wash the lettuce for the salad?"
- "I can't seem to find my glasses."
- "I think I've seen this episode of *Wheel of Fortune* before."

On the page, dialogue must only be included if it is moving your story forward. If you are setting the scene as a mundane night at home, then including a dull chat about a TV show might be ideal and help the reader understand the relationship's dynamic. Otherwise, cut the humdrum chatter of life. Only use dialogue when it has a purpose.

With these useful tricks up your sleeve, you can craft realistic conversations that enhance your plot and deepen the reader's connection with your characters. Bring dialogue to life and the rest will follow.

▶ CHAPTER 14 WEAVE BACKSTORY CAREFULLY & SPARINGLY

Where did your characters come from? What was their childhood like? Were they spoiled or picked on, or did something even more traumatic happen to them?

As the author, you need to know all of your MC's backstory. But you need to give careful thought to what, when and how to tell your reader.

WHAT IS BACKSTORY?

Backstory refers to the events that happened before the start of your novel that impact your MC and their current thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Using backstory appropriately will help your readers understand and truly care about what happens to your main character.

Some writers believe that using backstory is essential to understanding the events your story is based on. Others feel that backstory should be avoided because it takes the reader "backwards" instead of moving them forward towards the climax.

We think that, as with a lot of things in writing, a few tidbits here and there to keep your reader hungering for more is the best approach. Not too much backstory, but not too little either.

The key to using backstory effectively is: don't give away too much. It's the mystery and the desire to keep turning the pages to find out what happens next that makes your story come alive for your reader. So carefully measure out backstory and weave a few morsels into the narrative here and there. Just enough to whet your reader's appetite.

HOW TO WEAVE IN BACKSTORY

Depending on your writing style, there are a couple of different ways to approach backstory. Some novelists will write up the backstory as a separate document with dozens of pages full of information about the characters and their histories. This helps to solidify in your mind why your characters act the way they do. Then you can use this treatise as a map to pick and choose what your narrator or MC wants to tell your reader.

Other writers have a fully formed character already acting out in their mind's eye and have a firm grasp on what in the past has happened to make their MC behave a certain way. In that case, you can drop in gentle hints at backstory as you write to help clarify things.

Stephen King starts each of his novels with a very brief but deep insight into his character's life experiences, whereas Kate Atkinson offers small bits of backstory throughout her novels to give readers a moment of instant, powerful clarification. Other authors like Michael Chabon use flashbacks as fully rendered scenes.

You want to be able to hold back just enough details, doling them out on an as-needed basis and only at the time that best serves your story.

“Backstory is like a flavor you can't quite pick, lurking in the layers of a curry. You know it's there and it enhances the flavor, but it's intangible and fleeting. Use it sparingly!”

Sandy Vaile

HOW TO TELL IF YOU HAVE THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF BACKSTORY

When writing your novel, you want to focus on getting everything down on paper. It isn't until the editing process that you decide what stays and what gets cut. It's the same with backstory; write what you know and edit it later.

The key to deciding if your backstory is working is to ask two things:

1 IF I CUT THIS PART OUT, DOES IT CHANGE THE STORY?

If you can delete an entire scene without the story being affected in any major way, then it's not essential and should be cut. If the narrative or your character's actions no longer make sense without the understanding you gleaned from the backstory, then keep it in.

2 DOES IT HELP CREATE MYSTERY?

Do these backstory elements help you create an atmosphere of mystery that will compel your reader to keep turning pages? If so, keep them in.

Be ruthless. Less is more when it comes to backstory. Trust your reader to be able to put two and two together to arrive at their own conclusion.

AVOID THESE BACKSTORY MISTAKES

Using backstory in one major chunk in the opening pages.

You want to start your novel in the midst of inciting action. Starting with a big chunk of backstory prevents your reader from being immediately drawn in.

Relying on backstory and past wounds instead of developing your characters in the present.

It's OK if your characters have colorful pasts, but when you rely on backstory as the only device to help you flesh out your characters, you won't get a fully three-dimensional character that readers can relate to. Use backstory as a springboard from which your main character changes over the course of your novel.

Dramatic backstory and hidden wounds aren't used at all.

If you add in a dramatic backstory event and don't use it again later on, your readers won't be happy. When they get to the end of your story and realize that your main character's horrendous past never came into play in the final denouement, they'll feel cheated.

If you mention hidden wounds, make sure you explore them in your story.

Your best pieces are buried in your backstory.

An excellent example of this is Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*. She wrote this story first and when finished, sent it off to her publisher. After reading her manuscript, the editor made a startling observation that changed the course of literary history. The editor told Harper Lee that the real story was in the backstory when Scout's father Atticus defends an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman. Thus, the impetus for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Imagine. That idea was buried in backstory.

FINAL TAKE-AWAYS

A rich and deep backstory helps you write from a position of knowledge and authority. That said, it doesn't mean the reader needs to see it all.

It may take a lot of work on your part to develop a full backstory to fully understand your own characters, but it will pay off in satisfied readers. Give your readers as much as they need and no more. It's in the little, seemingly inconsequential details of backstory that your reader will find believability.



▶ CHAPTER 15 RESEARCH IS NOT A DIRTY WORD...REALLY!

Does your stomach crawl with dread when you hear the word “research”? It shouldn’t. In fact, research can be fun. Seriously!

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Research can be accomplished in myriad ways. Using the internet is the quickest, most pain-free way to research.

The key is to not trust every source of information; always consult multiple credible sources.

You could go old-school and visit the library. Librarians have wide access to both print and digital resources that you may not be able to access on your own, and have their own expertise on a wide range of subjects.

You can interview experts on the subject matter of your novel. This is a great technique if you’re writing a crime story or some other technical profession that needs authenticity to create believability.

Or the best option: travel to the locations where your story is taking place. Depending on where you live, you might even be able to write off a research trip on your taxes. (But you’ll have to research that to see if it holds true for your situation!)

DO YOU REALLY NEED RESEARCH FOR FICTION?

Let’s say you’re writing a novel set in London, and your MC is eating Trix cereal for breakfast. Trix is definitely an American breakfast cereal, and your readers, especially those in the UK, will pounce on that. If you mess up on a bigger detail, you’ll lose credibility as a writer and maybe even get your novel dropped in the trash.

And that’s the real reason why you should research your fiction: you want your writing to be believable, even though it’s a completely made-up story out of your own imagination. If you can use research to add interesting details about a location, a profession, a bit of cultural lore, or anything with your own five senses, you can create a world where your reader will follow you anywhere.

Even a completely fictional world needs to have some basis in facts that you’ll need to research. The *Star Trek* series written by Gene Roddenberry used his experience flying fighter aircraft in WWII to give realism to how a starship crew would behave and communicate. That’s realism you can’t fake.

TIPS ON HOW TO USE RESEARCH

Depending on your genre, you might have to do extensive research to create a believable world. For example, if you’re writing an historical romance, you’ll need to research everything about the time period of your story. You’ll need to know what they ate, how they dressed, and how they spent their time. A great piece of historical fiction that uses research in a highly effective way is *Girl With a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier.

If you’re writing a detective novel, you’d better have a firm grasp of police procedure. Your best bet is to make friends with the local constabulary and listen to their stories. You’ll get vivid details not only on the fundamentals of policing, but also on how detectives act, behave, and feel.

You might be wondering how you’re to go about doing all of this. Truthfully, if you’re used to being a solitary writer holed up at home and creating imaginative worlds, it might be hard to put yourself

“If you steal from one author it’s plagiarism; if you steal from many it’s research.”
Wilson Mizner

out there and interview people. That's OK. Start with the local librarian and work your way up from there. The more people you can talk to, the richer your writing will be.

Another tip is to read everything you can get your hands on. If you are writing a psychological thriller, a book like *Listening to Killers: Lessons Learned From 20 Years as a Psychological Expert Witness in Murder Cases* by James Garbarino is incredibly insightful. Whatever your topic, it's a good bet that someone, somewhere has written all about it.

Finally, you can find anything on YouTube. Really. If you need to know how to build an igloo for your survival story, there is a video to show you how. If you have a scene in which someone needs to have a boil lanced, there is a video that will show you all the (disgusting) details. YouTube is awash with how-to videos that will help you paint your scenes as realistically as possible.

One caveat: use all of your senses when researching. Pay attention to how things taste, look, smell, sound, and feel. This will bring your writing alive with authentic bits that your readers can relate to. For example, if you set your story in Greece, but you can't afford to travel there for research, go visit a Greek restaurant close by and sample the different dishes. Then add in a little of what the restaurant and food looked like, smelled, tasted, and even sounded like.

TAKE-AWAYS

You have a responsibility as a writer to be as accurate as possible with your work. Your make-believe world needs to ring true. You can't fake it if you want your readers to stick with your novel.

Think of it this way: **Your story didn't really happen, but it should be situated on a solid framework of facts.**



▶ CHAPTER 16 HOW TO TIE EVERYTHING TOGETHER... AKA HOW TO WRITE A KILLER ENDING

What's the most important piece of writing in your entire novel? Some will argue you need a strong hook and opening scene(s) to draw your reader in. And some will argue that your ending needs to be killer if you want a satisfied reader, and especially if you want a reader to advocate for your book to others.

Let's just say that both are equally as important: you need to spend as much time and effort crafting a satisfying ending as you do in grabbing your reader's attention from the start.

And if you've ever read a book with a weak or unsatisfying ending that doesn't wrap everything up, you know how important getting the ending right is to your readers.

SO HOW DO YOU WRITE A GREAT ENDING?

There's really no set, standard way to end your story. Think about all of the great books you've read. What made each ending so satisfying? They didn't all end happily ever after, so that's definitely not a rule.

Actually there's only one hard and fast rule of writing a killer ending: Let no new backstory enter your climax once it has begun.

You can't introduce a new piece of information about your MC without having foreshadowed it somewhere earlier in your story. And you can't cheat and have everything work out fine in the end without your MC doing the hard work and the transformation to get there.

Here are a few suggestions to help you write the most compelling ending possible:

1. Your MC must be the impetus that starts the climax. He or she can't just sit back and let the climactic denouement happen, and even more importantly, your main character can't be rescued. She's got to do the hard part herself.
2. Your MC must transform. He has to conquer his inner demons and show real change. And it must be in line with his character arc; you can't introduce a new character trait without having your MC do the hard work of transforming. This means that a new and better (or worse) MC should emerge at the end.
3. A satisfying ending links in some way to the larger theme introduced at the beginning.
4. You can surprise your reader at the end, but you definitely need to satisfy them. And satisfying your reader doesn't mean always ending "happily ever after." It depends more on your genre. Some are obvious: if it's a traditional romance, the two lovers must end up together, and if it's a murder mystery, they should catch the perp.
5. At other times, however, it is more satisfying to your reader if the lovers don't end up together. Think of the film *Titanic*: very romantic and satisfying even though (spoiler alert!) Jack doesn't make it.
6. Make sure all of your subplots are tied up. Nothing is more unsatisfying than to realize something you thought was important throughout the novel never came up in the end.

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS

Writer's Digest published a great article in 2012 by James V. Smith Jr. called *How to End a Novel with a Punch* that introduced some key questions you should ask yourself about your ending to make sure it's as strong as it can be. Here are a few of our favorites.



- Is your last incident a titanic final struggle? No other incident that comes before your closer should be more exciting.
- Does your main character confront the worthy adversary? Absolutely mandatory.
- Does your ending include exposition? But be careful: too much explanation causes the final incident to drag. Ideally, the genius of the ending should be self-evident. Aim for that “ah, now it all makes sense” moment.
- Does your ending rely on flashbacks? Avoid them at all costs in the final denouement.
- Does your ending leave your reader feeling a sense of wonder? What will readers tell their friends after they put down your book?
- Does your reader experience transcendence when reading your book? Did she laugh, cry, or feel some other strong emotional response to your main character’s resolution?
- Have you ever read a book and became so deeply connected to the main character that you missed them after finishing the book?

That’s the ending you want to write.

TAKE-AWAYS

Create a killer ending that far surpasses any other incident in the story. Pull out all the action, conflict, imagery, and dialogue you can, and blow your readers away. Give them the heights and the depths of the emotions you want them to feel.

Leave them feeling sorry that they might never meet your main character again.

Then you can write the sequel...



▶ CHAPTER 17 THE DRAFTS YOUR NOVEL NEEDS (AND WHY YOU PROBABLY WON'T USE ONE WORD OF YOUR FIRST DRAFT)

You've finished planning and are ready to start writing. But what should you expect?

For this final step, we're handing over to Katja L Kaine, founder of *The Novel Factory* software. Her excellent guide to drafting is one of our most popular guest posts of all time.



Nobody writes their final novel on the first pass. I'm not given to making dogmatic statements, but that's one I'm willing to bet my manuscript on.

In fact, two of my favorite writing quotes refer to just that:

- *"I'm writing a first draft and reminding myself that I'm simply shoveling sand into a box so that later I can build sandcastles."* Shannon Hale

Or, more succinctly:

- *"The first draft of anything is shit."* Ernest Hemingway

QUESTIONS ABOUT WRITING DRAFTS

- How many drafts should you do?
- How long should you spend on each?
- What should you focus on during each draft?
- How can you make the most efficient use of time?
- How can you avoid backtracking?

These are the kinds of questions that I've pondered since I first started writing and developing my writing process, and this article is an attempt to summarize what I've learned so far in answer to these questions.

HOW I APPROACH DRAFTING

The way I draft is an extension of the way I approach novel planning as a whole – which is to start with a simple concept and then add more and more detail until I have a fairly comprehensive outline.

With drafting that means starting with a rough outline, slowly fleshing it out, and adding detail, tweaking and weaving until it is finished, polished prose.

I try to approach each draft with different priorities in mind so I can focus on tackling particular elements of story-telling at each stage while setting aside other aspects for later so I don't get bogged down trying to do too much at once.

In the following sections I give details about the objective I assign to each draft, how I prepare for that draft (i.e. what I do in advance) and then the technique I use when actually writing it. I've added a rough guide to projected timescales and a bullet point summary of each stage.

DRAFT ZERO

Objective: Foundations

The objective of Draft Zero is to put down a sturdy foundation for your First Draft to stand on. This draft is a stepping stone between planning and drafting, and isn't actually prose, hence it being called Draft Zero, rather than First Draft.

I call this draft 'blocking'.

Preparation

Before doing the blocking, you should have planned your plot in detail, so you should have a good idea of premise, story beats, characters, locations and a summary outline of each proposed scene.

Then again, maybe you're a seat-of-the-pantser and you're coming at it cold. Just thinking of you people gives me the sweats. But that's fine – all are welcome here.

Technique

Blocking really isn't the first draft, and to keep this clear in my mind I write the blocking in the present tense almost in the style of stage directions. It's a straightforward description of what happens, one thing after another. Sort of like this:

Harry goes to the station where there are lots of people. He finds his way to the right platform and works out how to run into the pillar. He meets Ron on the train and they immediately get on great and buy lots of interesting sweets. They meet Hermione, who is obviously a teacher's pet. Etcetera.

There is no descriptive language unless it's important to the plot, and I don't worry about sentence structure, nice wording or sometimes even (you may need to sit down for this) punctuation and grammar.

SUMMARY OF DRAFT ZERO (BLOCKING)

- Foundations • Present tense stage directions • Minimalist, rough and ready
- Timescale: 2-4 weeks

FIRST DRAFT

Objective - Scaffolding

The objective of the First Draft is to get it out of the way because otherwise you can't write your

Second Draft. The First Draft will teach you heaps about your plot (and its holes) and your characters. Once you've finished your first draft, you will be much better informed about where there are plot problems, where characters aren't acting consistently or where physical or logical limitations need addressing.

Preparation

Before I start my first draft, I will have completed my blocking, or Draft Zero. This means I won't be staring at the screen wondering what's going to happen in any given scene, as I already have the crib notes.

Technique

I approach the First Draft like a steam train. I take a deep breath, lift my hands over the keyboard and then type furiously until it's done. No looking back, no rewriting sentences. Clichés, tense changes, repeated words, purple prose, bad grammar, misspellings – all are totally acceptable.

Why?

Because you will not keep a single word of your First Draft. Not a single word. If you think that sounds painful then you'd better brace yourself. New writers sometimes labor under the impression that getting the First Draft done is getting the hard bit out of the way. Wrong.

The First Draft is the first step up the mountain. It would be much better if we could skip the whole First Draft and go straight to the second, but alas, logic disallows it.

So, don't waste time worrying over style, quality and word choice, because once you've completed your first draft you will understand your story so much better you will be cutting out entire chapters and scenes and all that agonizing will be wasted.

Writing your First Draft is an exercise in discovery, and it will give you the framework on which to hang your novel.

This is a really fun draft as you can be free and loose and not worry about perfection. You can let your story carry you along, let your imagination run wild. Enjoy it.

SUMMARY OF FIRST DRAFT

- Scaffolding • Steam train, no looking back • Don't worry about style, just shovel out words
- Timescale: 1-2 months

SECOND DRAFT

Objective – Brickwork

The second draft is where your novel actually starts to take shape and starts resembling something like a novel. You're putting in the bricks, if you will. You wouldn't want to live in a house of bare bricks, but it is starting to look like a house.

Preparation

It should be fairly obvious that before writing the Second Draft you will have finished your First Draft, as it would take some quantum physics style bending to do otherwise. In addition, I also do Character Viewpoint Synopses before starting draft two.

This means I look at the entire novel from the point of view of each of the major characters, thinking about what they are doing and thinking in (and in-between) each scene. I find that this not only helps my characters develop into layered human beings, but it also adds interesting twists and turns to the plot.

Technique

I would say the way I approach the Second Draft is what most people would think of as actually 'writing the book'. Now is the time to write as if you mean it. That means looking at scene structure, balance, pace, sentence structure, vocabulary and style. It means editing as you go, trying to find fresh and interesting ways to describe the details of life and people.

It means trying to really bring the story to life. You should write your Second Draft as if you believe it's going to be the Final Draft. Write what you want people to read.

It's not of course, you're probably less than halfway there. But shhhh, don't tell yourself that.

While writing the Second Draft, you will probably come up with oodles more ideas and inspiration. If these ideas are timely and appropriate to the scene you are writing, then go ahead and put them in.

But if they relate to a sub-plot that threads all the way through, or something for a different scene, then don't get distracted and start hopping about right now. Make a note of it for later.

This way you can maintain your forward momentum and not get trapped in a spiral of constantly trying to make it perfect with the result that you never get to the end. And, similarly if not as drastically as with the First Draft, a lot will change over this period of writing, so it's better to wait until you have all the information – i.e. have finished your Second Draft – before becoming too much of a perfectionist about sections you've passed.

SUMMARY OF SECOND DRAFT

- Brickwork • Complete character viewpoint synopses • Structure, balance, pace
- Vocabulary and style • Try to keep forward momentum • Timescale: 4–8 months

THIRD DRAFT

Objective - Plaster

Now we're really getting somewhere.

To stretch the novel-as-house metaphor to its limits, now you are putting on the plaster, doorframes, windows, coving, skirting board and roof.

The house is starting to look like something you can live in. It's still going to need some finishing touches, but when you're doing the Third Draft, you can start to see things taking shape.

Preparation

Before starting the Third Draft there is usually a lot of work to do.

Throughout the Second Draft you will probably have been coming up with more ideas and inspiration, as noted above. Before you start the Third Draft, it's time to think all these through and add in notes, sections and prose to your Second Draft. It's fine if this is in a slightly clunky way, you'll address getting everything beautifully smoothed out when you do the next draft.

While in between drafts, you'll be able to get a better overview perspective on sub-plots and how they develop, as well as foreshadowing and themes. It's also a good time to do more in-depth research, while you've got a bit of breathing space and don't have a word count target hanging over your head.

Technique

Once more into the breach, my friends. Now you need to get serious about every single word. This time it's fine to go back as many times as you want to perfect something. Hop around if you need to

while focusing on polishing one sub-plot or a developing a particular theme that runs throughout the story. However – be wary of falling into the trap of rewriting the beginning over and over again, and neglecting the later parts of the book. If you notice you're doing this, then ban yourself from editing the first third of the book until you've given the later chapters a good seeing to. You could even try working on the scenes or chapters backwards, starting from the end.

Now focus on: sub-plots, layered characters that come to life, nuanced relationships, symbolism, themes, textured description and foreshadowing every element of your climax.

At the same time, you should continually be improving the prose itself. Every single word. Use ProWritingAid to check for any clichés, dodgy metaphors or sentences that aren't working hard enough. Remove any clunky sentences or overdone description. Weed out repetition, telling where you could be showing, and lazy or unnecessary adverbs.

SUMMARY OF THIRD DRAFT

- Plaster • Incorporate notes • Consider • Subplots • Layered, believable characters
- Nuanced relationships • Symbolism • Themes • Textured description • Foreshadowing
- Carry out research to add realism and detail • Work your prose until it is lean, mean and gleams • Timescale: 4-8 months

FINAL DRAFT(S)

Objective – Décor

Now you really are on the home straight. This draft is for putting on the finishing touches, tidying up any loose ends, and getting the manuscript prepped and primed for submission.

It is where you polish and varnish, add color and bake some fresh cookies to make it smell like home.

Preparation

Now is a great time to get feedback. This could be from a writing group, in person or online, or from a tame editing buddy (don't waste time on getting feedback from family and friends unless they are also writers). You may even wish to pay for a professional editing service.

Ideally you will get all your feedback for the entire novel and have time to sit on it before applying anything, rather than just going for knee-jerk reactions and tugging your novel in too many different directions to match the opinions of lots of different people.

If that's not possible, and you get your feedback in smaller chunks, such as chapters, then you'll probably need to add another draft after this one, to read everything in faster succession after you've made your changes.

The type of feedback you get will depend on your particular foibles and flaws, so what you need to work on will be directly related to that.

Technique

Slow and steady, with a critical eye. Paying attention to detail.

I like to change the font and size of the text, as it tricks my brain into reading it afresh again, rather than just glazing over and staring at the same sentences for the hundredth time.

Use ProWritingAid to make every sentence so tight it's ready to pop.

Another useful technique is also to read your work out loud, as it will often become obvious when words of sentences are clunky.

Dig out any tired phrases, consider every single element of punctuation.

Edit, edit, edit. Then, one day – call it done.

SUMMARY OF FINAL DRAFT

- Decor • Get external feedback from humans and technology
- Find new ways to get fresh eyes • Edit edit edit edit edit edit • Timescale: 3-6 months

SUMMARY

I hope you find it useful to find out a bit more about how I approach the drafting process, and that this is a helpful framework. Feel free to play around with it so that it works for the type of author you are and the type of book you're writing. Just make sure that you're clear on what you need to achieve in each draft.



▶ CONCLUSION

At the end of this training regimen, you will have a roadmap for your novel. You know where you want to end up and how you want to get there. Of course, the route may change once you are on the road and that's OK. Stay open to new ideas.

Through this preparation, you now know who your main characters are, what they love, what they fear, what dreams they are working toward. You already understand how they will react in the face of adversity and who they will become by the end of the book.

You will already know the key elements of your story's world so that you won't lose momentum during your first draft trying to figure them out.

Laying all of this groundwork will help you get through the marathon of writing as easily as possible. And that's the most important thing. You will never regret the time you spent writing your manuscript, you will only regret not doing it.

So get yourself as ready as possible, and then WRITE!



▶ APPENDIX ABOUT ProWritingAid

ProWritingAid IS A WORLD-CLASS EDITING SOFTWARE: AN ESSENTIAL PART OF ANY WRITER'S TOOL BOX.

ProWritingAid analyzes your writing and presents its findings in 25 different reports. Each writer has their own strengths and weaknesses and so different PWA reports will appeal to different users.

1. The Writing Style Report

The Writing Style Report is one of the most popular and comprehensive reports that ProWritingAid offers. It highlights several areas of writing that should be revised to improve readability, including passive voice, overuse of adverbs, repeated sentence starts, hidden verbs and much more.

2. The Grammar Report

The Grammar Report works similarly to the spelling and grammar checkers in a word processor. It highlights any word that's not in our dictionary in case it's misspelled. It also looks at the construction of the sentence to make sure that the structure, punctuation and tense are correct.

But, in addition to these standard grammar checks, our team of copyeditors have been inputting thousands of specific checks that they have come across in their years of editing. For example, they noticed that many writers write "adverse" when they actually mean "averse"? When this comes up, the software will offer a short explanation about how the two words are different so that you can make sure you select the correct one.

3. The Overused Words Report

There are some words and sentence constructions that are fine to use occasionally, but become problematic when they are overused. They fall into five main categories:

1. Too Wishy-Washy
2. Telling Rather Than Showing
3. Weak Words Dependent on Intensifiers
4. Non-specific Words
5. Awkward Sentence Constructions

4. The Clichés and Redundancies Report

Writers often use clichés when they are working on their first draft because thinking up original wording takes time and can interrupt creative flow. That's fine. But, when you go back to edit, this report will pick out instances of unoriginal phrasing so that you can replace them with fresh ideas.

Redundant wording creeps into the texts of even the most experienced writers. It adds quantity to your writing, but not quality. Every word in your writing should be there for a reason. This report helps you eliminate the clutter.

5. The Sticky Sentence Report

A sticky sentence is one that is full of glue words. Glue words are the 200 or so most common English words (in, of, on, the, at, if, etc.). They are the empty space that readers need to get through before they can get to your ideas. Generally, your sentences should contain less than 45% glue words. If they contain more, they should probably be re-written to increase clarity. Let's look at a quick example:

- **ORIGINAL:** Dave walked over into the back yard of the school in order to see if there was a new bicycle that he could use in his class. Glue index: 60.7% - Sentence length 27 words

- **REDRAFT:** Dave checked the school's back yard for a new bicycle to use in class. Glue index: 42.8%
- Sentence length 14 words

The second sentence is much easier to read. Unnecessary information has been discarded, and the wording is more concise. The point of the sentence comes across clearly.

6. The Repeats Check

Writers often mistakenly use the same word several times in the span of one paragraph because it's foremost in their mind. But those repeats can set off an echo in the reader's mind – that subconscious feeling of “Didn't he just say that?” It can be irritating to read and it can detract from what you are trying to say.

But it's difficult for writers to spot repetition in their own work. When they are editing, they go over the same text several times and become impervious to that echo feeling. And when you replace a word when making amendments, it's easy to forget that the same word was in the sentence before or after. This report highlights repeated words and phrases in your document so you can use a more diverse vocabulary.

7. The Sentence Length Report

Writing that uses varied sentence lengths keeps the reader's brain engaged. Some should be short and punchy, others should be long and flowing. Sentence variety adds an element of music to your writing.

ProWritingAid will create a bar graph of your sentence lengths so that you can pick out areas where you should add more variety. It will also give you an Average Sentence Length Score, which will highlight whether you are using too many long sentences, which may result in a monotonous text, or too many short sentences, which may result in a choppy text.

8. The Pronoun Report

When writers are in creative mode, they often rely on pronouns to keep the narrative moving: “He did this”, “She did that”, “They ran there”, “I found out.” That's fine. It's more important to keep writing momentum up than it is to get every sentence just right.

ProWritingAid will scan your document and calculate a pronoun percentage. Ideally it should fall somewhere between 4% and 15%. Any more than this and writing can feel dull. This is especially so with initial pronouns – those at the start of the sentence. The initial pronoun percentage should be under 30%. Run the report and replace your pronoun-heavy passages with more dynamic wording.

9. The Transition Report

Statistics show that published writing has a high level of transition use. Transition words are the road signs in writing. And great transitions help your reader follow your train of thought without becoming bogged down trying to discern your meaning. Words and phrases like “similarly”, “nevertheless”, “in order to”, “likewise,” or “as a result” show the relationships between your ideas and can help illustrate agreement, contrast or show cause and effect.

The Transition Report will give you a “transitions score”, which is based on the percentage of sentences that contain a transition. We recommend that you aim for a score of 25% or higher, which means that you use at least one transition word or phrase every four sentences.

10. The Consistency Check

Consistency is so important in writing. It makes it feel professional and polished. ProWritingAid doesn't care if you choose to write in American or British English, as long as you choose one and stick to it. Likewise, it's up to you whether you capitalize a word like “Yoga” but the report will highlight if you have done it in one place and not in another.

The Consistency Check highlights inconsistency of spelling, hyphenation, capitalization, and punctuation.

11. The Pacing Check

Pacing refers to the speed at which a story is told and how quickly the reader is moved through events. Good writing contains faster-paced sections, such as dialogue and character action, as well as slower-paced sections, such as introspection and backstory. Differently paced sections should complement each other, allowing the reader to move with you through the narrative.

ProWritingAid's Pacing Check finds those areas in your writing that are paced more slowly so that you can spread them out.

12. The Dialogue Tags Check

Dialogue tags are the words that refer dialogue to a specific character. The two most common examples are "said" and "asked". They are essential in writing, particularly in scenes that include several characters, because they help the reader follow the conversation. Ideally, your dialogue tags should be invisible within your writing, just signposts that point out who is speaking. The character's actions or the dialogue itself should be carrying the emotion. Where possible, try to omit dialogue tags altogether. Instead, use description and action to point out your speaker.

The Dialogue Tags Check will highlight all your dialogue tags so that you can find a better way to demonstrate emotion.

13. The Sensory Report (NLP Predicates Check)

Every writer has a tendency to favor one or two of their senses over the others, and this affects the way that he or she experiences the world, processes information and makes memories. When you are writing for a broad audience, you should try to write with words (primarily verbs, adverbs and adjectives) associated with all five of the senses. It will help emotionally engage with the widest range of people.

Run your writing through the Sensory Report and make sure that you have all five senses covered.

14. The Vague and Abstract Words Check

There are two types of words that muddy the waters for clarity and concise writing: vague and abstract words. Vague words lack specific information. If you say you will be "slightly" late it's less clear than if you say you will be 20 minutes late. Your understanding of "slightly late" may be quite different to mine.

An abstract noun denotes something intangible, such as a quality or state, whereas a concrete noun denotes the person or thing that may possess that quality or be in that state. For example: man is concrete and humanity is abstract, brain is concrete and thought is abstract. Abstract nouns are sometimes perfect, but they should not be used to excess as they lack specificity.

Run the Vague and Abstract Words Check to find those words that should be replaced with something more specific or concrete.

15. The Thesaurus Check

Often, changing just one word in a sentence allows a writer to present a more nuanced or specific idea. The contextual thesaurus allows you to explore a wider vocabulary. Unlike most thesaurus suggestions, our report takes into account the context of the word in the sentence and offers replacement words that fit within that context.

16. The Diction Report

The Diction Report helps you avoid unnecessarily complicated writing by analyzing your word selection and sentence construction.

When it comes to writing, less is more. Make every word count. If it's not essential, cut it. Too often when writers are trying to sound authoritative, they choose the wordy ways of saying something simple. Why write "has the ability to" when you can write "can"? You're just using more words to say the same thing, which actually makes your writing much less clear.

17. The Alliteration Report

Alliteration is the repetition of a beginning consonant sound. One of the most famous examples is "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers". Alliteration creates an enjoyable rhythm when reading and so is often used in advertising, or to attract attention and comment. Alliteration is also widely used in poetry.

The Alliteration Report will highlight all instances of alliteration in your document.

18. The Homonym Check

There are many words in the English language that sound alike but have different spellings. Choosing the wrong spelling can change your sentence completely. The sentence "He lost his patients" means something quite different from "He lost his patience".

The Homonyms Check will highlight all the words with homonyms. Hover your cursor over the word and the alternatives will be displayed as a tooltip.

19. The Corporate Wording Report

The corporate wording report identifies places where wording can be simplified. It concentrates on words that are often found in corporate reports that make the reports harder to read and understand. It highlights these words and suggests alternatives.

20. The Acronym Check

An acronym is a word or name formed as an abbreviation from the initial components in a phrase or a word, e.g. NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network), or LOL (Laugh Out Loud). The Acronym Report highlights all of the acronyms in your text, and creates a list of all the acronyms you have used. Misspelled or inconsistent acronyms are not usually picked up by normal spell-checkers so the list allows you to easily scan for errors. It can also help you create a glossary of acronyms for your text.

21. The Complex Words Check

ProWritingAid defines complex words as those with three or more syllables. It is not wrong to use complex words, but paragraphs that contain too many will be less clear. If you can replace a complex word with a simpler one – e.g. enquired with asked or proximate with near – then do it.

Run the Complex Words Check and then scan your document for paragraphs that contain a higher than usual occurrence of multi-syllable words.

22. The Eloquence Check

This report was designed to help you develop your use of stylistic writing techniques such as alliteration, epistrophe, and hendiadys. The items in this report are not suggestions, just aids to help you along the way.

23. The Combo Check

The Combo Report is a customizable feature that allows users to choose their favorite reports and run them simultaneously. This is a great feature for content writers, bloggers or students who edit a lot of shorter documents rather than one long book. You know your own bad writing habits better than anyone, so choose the reports that will have the biggest impact for YOU.

24. The House Style Check

If you are a premium user, you can create your own House Style Check to look for specific issues relating to your organization. For example, imagine a fashion design company who always wanted their September collection to be referred to as the “autumn” collection rather than the “fall” collection. They could create a rule where ProWritingAid highlighted any instance of the word “fall” and offered a suggestion that it be changed to “autumn”.

25. The Plagiarism Report

Our plagiarism checker is designed to help you detect unoriginal content in your writing. Once you have detected unoriginal content, you will be able to add proper citations to your document. Plagiarism is a major concern for many people, especially those writing academic works. The plagiarism checks performed by ProWritingAid will check your work against over a billion web-pages and articles to make sure that you have correctly cited any unoriginal content. It is easy for unoriginal content to slip into your work, and the consequences can be disastrous.

