

# THE 3rd Degree

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA

MWA University

*MWA-U is a one-day, affordable, accessible workshop for writers at any stage of their journey*

by Jess Lourey

Mystery Writers of America University (MWA-U) was the brainchild of Reed Farrel Coleman, former Executive Vice President (EVP) of MWA. Already an established, award-winning mystery author, Reed began teaching creative writing at Hofstra University. In 2008, he approached MWA then-EVP Harry Hunsicker with the idea of MWA partnering with Hofstra to offer writing workshops to MWA members. Harry liked the suggestion, but the financial crisis hit and the workshop proposal had to be moved to the back burner.

Enter Larry Light, who revived the proposal when he became MWA EVP in 2009. Larry assigned Reed, Hank Phillippi Ryan, Dan Stashower, and me to the Education Committee, and the three of us created the blueprint for what would become MWA University.

Our goal was to offer a one-day, accessible workshop on the craft of writing for writers in any genre, at any stage in the journey. Each 55-minute workshop would be taught by a different instructor, and all instructors would be published authors with college-level teaching experience.

The trial run of MWA-U came in October of 2010 in Bethesda, Maryland. Over 100 people registered, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Now in its third year, MWA-U is a dynamic, low-cost all-day workshop that offers practical, tried-and-true tools for crafting a novel, starting at the idea stage and taking participants all the way through character, plot, setting, editing, and the writer's life. Participants walk away with a packed tool chest, equipped and excited to begin, return to, or revise their novel.

This issue of *The Third Degree* is dedicated to MWA-University and offers you a sampling of the practical, innovative, and engaging material offered. As you'll see from the articles, MWA-U is not genre-specific and provides something for writers at any stage in the journey. MWA-U continues to evolve and is dedicated to bringing its unique program to four different U.S. cities each calendar year. Attendees need not be members of MWA.

*Jess Lourey is a tenured professor at a Minnesota college as well as the author of the Murder-by-Month mysteries and The Toadhouse Trilogy (YA). You can find out more at [www.jesslourey.com](http://www.jesslourey.com).*

## MWA-U



**Mystery Writers of America University (MWA-U) is a full-day, low-cost writing seminar designed to teach participants the essential skills needed to write a novel, from the idea stage to the final editing. The focus is on the craft of writing, and the college-level courses are taught by published writers and experienced teachers.**

**For more information on upcoming locations of MWA-U, visit the MWA website:**

**[www.mysterywriters.org](http://www.mysterywriters.org)  
or visit [www.mwau.org](http://www.mwau.org)**

## MWA-U TTD – Additional Author Biographies

Called a hard-boiled poet by NPR's Maureen Corrigan and the "noir poet laureate" in the Huffington Post, **Reed Farrel Coleman** is a former executive vice president of MWA. He has published sixteen novels, as well as short stories, poems, and essays. He is a three-time recipient of the Shamus Award for Best PI Novel of the Year and is a two-time Edgar Award nominee. He has also won the Macavity, Audie, Barry, and Anthony Awards. Reed is an adjunct instructor of English at Hofstra University and is a founding member of MWA-U. He lives with his family on Long Island.

**Laura DiSilverio** served twenty years as an Air Force intelligence officer before retiring to write and parent full time. In that capacity, she worked with an F-16 wing, with the National Reconnaissance Office, and at the Pentagon and learned lots of stuff she can never, ever write about. She writes the Mall Cop mystery series (Berkley Prime Crime) and the Swift Investigations PI series (Minotaur), as well as the Southern Beauty Shop mysteries under the pen name Lila Dare. The first of her private investigator novels, *Swift Justice*, was named a finalist for the Lefty Award for Best Humorous Mystery of 2010, and *The Writer* magazine featured her as a Breakthrough author (March 2011). She has a BA in English from Trinity University, an MA in English from the University of Pennsylvania, and taught writing, literature and public speaking at the United States Air Force Academy.

**Hallie Ephron** is the author of seven published novels, including five series mystery novels and two suspense. Her newest, *Come and Find Me*, was published in March, 2011. Her *Never Tell a Lie* was made into the Lifetime Movie Network film, "And Baby Will Fall." It was also a finalist for the Mary Higgins Clark Award and for the Salt Lake Libraries Readers Choice Award, and won the David Award for best mystery of 2009. Ephron is an award-winning book reviewer for the *Boston Globe*. She is also the author *The Bibliophile's Devotional* and *1001 Books for Every Mood*. Hallie teaches writing at workshops around the country, including at Seascape Escape to Write retreat in Connecticut each fall. She also teaches for Grub Street Writers in Boston, and delivers online writing webinars through Writers Digest Books. Her *Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel: How to Knock 'Em Dead with Style* was nominated for Edgar and Anthony awards.

**John Galligan** is the author of the novel *The Wind Knot* (March, 2011), fourth in a series of mysteries featuring a wandering trout bum who becomes a reluctant sleuth when bodies turn up on the stream. The first in the series, *The Nail Knot*, is "a real treat" (Library Journal) set in Black Earth, Wisconsin. The second, *The Blood Knot*, was named *Crimescene Magazine's* 2005 Book of the Year. The third novel in series, the Montana-set *The Clinch Knot*, is a "stunning...excursion into the wilds of human frailty" (Publisher's Weekly). Galligan's debut novel, *Red Sky, Red Dragonfly* (2000) is a "smart and fast-paced novel" (Capital Times) and a "humorous and original tale spanning two continents...a winner" (Japan Times). He teaches writing at Madison College in Madison, Wisconsin.

**Jess Lourey** is the author of the Lefty-nominated Murder-by-Month mysteries set in Battle Lake, Minnesota, and featuring amateur sleuth Mira James. Jess also has written a YA magical realism novel set in the Midwest. In addition to writing, Jess is a tenured English and sociology professor in the Minnesota college system. When not raising her wonderful kids, teaching, or writing, you can find her gardening, traveling, and navigating the niceties and meanities of small-town life. She is a member of Sisters in Crime, The Loft, and Lake Superior Writers, and serves on the national board of MWA.

**Hank Phillippi Ryan** is on the air as investigative reporter at Boston's NBC affiliate. Her work has resulted in new laws, people sent to prison, homes removed from foreclosure, and millions of dollars in restitution. Along with her 30 EMMYs, Hank's won dozens of other journalism honors. The author of six crime fiction novels, she has won the Mary Higgins Clark Award and two Agathas, as well as the Anthony and Macavity Awards. Her book *The Other Woman* was nominated for the Agatha, Anthony, Macavity, Daphne and Shamus. Her newest thriller is *The Wrong Girl*, which the Booklist starred review called "another winner." Hank is president of national Sisters in Crime and on the national board of MWA.

**Daniel Stashower** is a two-time Edgar® winner whose most recent nonfiction books are *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* and (as co-editor) *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*. He is also the author of five mystery novels. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *American History*. His short stories have appeared in numerous collections, including *The Best American Mystery Stories*. Dan holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia University, and has taught creative writing and freshman composition courses at various universities for more than 20 years. Dan has also won the Anthony and Agatha awards, and is a recipient of the Raymond Chandler Fulbright Fellowship in Detective and Crime Fiction Writing.

The official newsletter of  
**Mystery Writers of America**  
ISSN #1535-9034  
Published 10 times per year

### MWA National Officers

PRESIDENT: Charlaine Harris  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT:  
Daniel J. Hale  
SECRETARY: Cathy Pickens  
TREASURER: Sharon Potts

### The Third Degree Staff

TTD COMMITTEE CHAIR:

Bill Cameron

TTD EDITORIAL BOARD:

(subject to change)

Donna Andrews, Mary Jane Clark,  
Michelle Gagnon, Greg Herren,  
Linda Joffe Hull, Harley Jane Kozak,  
Jess Lourey, Jeff Shelby,  
Brian Thornton, Jeri Westerson  
EDITOR: Beth Tindall  
ASST. EDITOR: Annie Chernow

### EDITORIAL SUBMISSIONS:

ttd-editor@mysterywriters.org  
For terms of submission, just ask.

### VITAL SIGNS, ADDRESS CHANGES AND MEMBERSHIP ISSUES:

Margery Flax

Administrative Director

Mystery Writers of America

1140 Broadway, Suite 1507

New York, NY 10001

TEL: 212/888-8171

FAX: 212/888-8107

E-MAIL: mwa@mysterywriters.org

WEB: www.mysterywriters.org

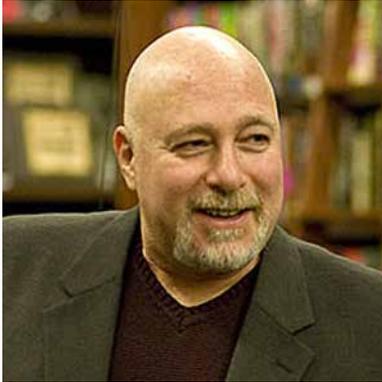
© 2013 Mystery Writers of America, Inc.

All rights reserved. The publication herein of news, advertising, seminars, classes, etc. does not imply any endorsement by or recommendation of MWA. The Edgar name and logo are registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.



# Fall in love with writing, not with what you've written

By Reed Farrel Coleman



It's been said that Mozart could simply jot down whole pieces of music without going back over his score to correct and refine it.

Well, I've met a lot of writers in my time — many of them supremely talented and disciplined — but none of them had Mozart's knack.

If editing and rewriting was good enough for William Shakespeare, Dante, T.S. Eliot, the Brontë sisters, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler et al., it is good enough for you. In fact, editing, rewriting, and tweaking are often the things that salvage a manuscript from the slush pile.

In my writing classes at Hofstra University and during my class at MWA-U, I put a lot of emphasis on the importance of editing. Why? I've found that the biggest problem new or inexperienced writers have is that they are too wedded to what they have written. They cling too dearly to the words they have put to paper.

What I try to get across to my students is that what they have written are just words on a page or on a screen, not revealed knowledge from the gods. To this end, I've come up with some basic mantras they can repeat to themselves when they get tense about rewriting.

## The Three Mantras

**There is no such thing as wasted writing.**

The only way to get better at anything is to do a lot of it. So even when your work isn't great, it helps you to get to where you want to go. Besides, you can always save what you've done and cannibalize it for later use. Some hold that you have to write 1,000,000 words before you really get good. Others, like Malcolm Gladwell, believe you have to put 10,000 hours into something before you are competent.

**Fall in love with writing, not with what you've written.**

If you're waiting to spend your millions or to have roses thrown at your feet, pick a different profession. Writing is difficult, isolating, and tiring. If you expect the rewards to be the reinforcement, you're in for disappointment. However, if you learn to let the process of writing be your reinforcement, you have a chance at success. In any case, never become too attached to your work. As I once said to

an editor, "I have my work and I have my children. I try never to get them confused." Words are not your darlings or your babies. They are just words.

**Editing makes weak writing stronger, fair writing good, and good writing great.**

That's pretty self-explanatory, no?

## Spewer vs. Write-itor

Just as writers usually break down into two categories — Pantzers (writers who work without an outline) and Outliners — there is a similar phenomenon when it comes to editing. There are Spewers (writers who must get the entire manuscript written before looking back to edit) and Write-itors (writers who write-edit-write-edit-write and so on). Just as with the Outliner/Pantzer dichotomy, there are advantages to both the Spewer and Write-itor approaches. Spewing allows the writer to get his or work out there and done with. In other words, they don't let roadblocks or bad days or anything else get in their way. They feel compelled to move forward with their project. This makes for great momentum and helps the writer avoid all those nasty mental games we play with ourselves.

I'm a Write-itor. I write a certain number of pages in the morning, reread and edit them in the afternoon, and do the same thing in the evening. The next day, I begin the day by rereading the edited work from the previous day. It's like getting a running start. It helps with continuity and to establish a very strong base for the project I'm working on. It is said that Hemingway reread whatever he was working on from page one every single day. I know that Daniel Woodrell (*Winter's Bone*) does this as well. It helps the writer become extremely familiar with his or her work. Not only does it help with continuity, but it helps with pacing, and rhythm as well. I do a limited version of the Hemingway/ Woodrell method. Until I get to page fifty, I reread the project from page one every day. Once I get to page fifty, I feel I have a solid base. Then I reread only the previous day's edited writing. I have published fourteen novels and usually do one draft. Of course, the catch is that that one draft has been edited hundreds of times.

Whatever method you choose, whatever process or routine, the important thing is that editing and rewriting must be an important part of it.

## Editorial Aids

1) Read the work aloud to yourself. Moving your lips while you read and listening to your internal voice does not count. Aloud means aloud. You will spot all

Continued on Page 4

## Rewriting, *continued from page 3*

awkward, arrhythmic, and clunky language. You will spot grammatical mistakes, incorrect punctuation, and sentence fragments.

2) Read aloud to someone else. Dogs, cats, iguanas and other household pets do not count. It is preferable that this other person have some familiarity with the genre or sub-genre you are working in. If you can't find someone, record yourself reading your work and listen to the playback.

3) Find two or three trusted readers. In this case, trust does not mean someone you trust with your kids. It means someone you trust to tell you the truth or to give their opinion honestly. You mom should not be one of your readers. It will help you learn to deal with criticism and to learn how to listen to what kernels of wisdom come within these criticisms. No one likes it, but it's part of the process.

4) Don't be so quick to change a manuscript based upon a single criticism. Follow my Rule of Threes. If you get the same specific criticism — *Your protagonist isn't likeable. The plot doesn't hang together. The villain is one dimensional* — from three people, you might then consider revisiting an issue. If you change your manuscript every time someone has a complaint, you'll never get it done.

### What To Edit For

#### 1) Entertainment Value

Genre writing means you are in the storytelling and entertainment business. Anything that keeps the reader from turning the pages or makes the reader stop and turn back is a bad for business.

#### 2) Clunky and Awkward Language

Not all writing has to be poetry, but it shouldn't be so jumbled that it slows down or confuses the reader. Short declarative sentences are usually best. When in doubt, choose comprehension over art.

#### 3) Confusing Plot Twists

It is one thing to mislead the reader, but never mistake misleading for confusing. No plot twist is so clever that it is worth making the reader put the book down.

#### 4) Run-on Sentences and Fragments, Punctuation

Particularly important for new and/or unpublished writers. Agents and editors are overwhelmed with submissions. There are many more people empowered to say no than yes. A manuscript full of grammatical errors is more likely to get the boot.

#### 5) Overwriting

It is one thing to try and write the great American novel. It is another to try to write the great American sentence ... every sentence. Limit your imagery, metaphors, similes, descriptions, and uses of adverbs. Less is more.

#### 6) Inconsistencies in Plot and Character

Not a good idea to have contradictions about events in the novel. If on page 2, X happens on Tuesday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, but on page 252 X happens on Wednesday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, that's a problem. The same is true for characters. Your protagonist cannot have blue eyes on page 20 and green eyes on page 200. He or she cannot act consistently one way for most of the book and then have them do a complete about-face near the end unless you've set the stage for such a shift.

#### 7) Inconsistencies in Setting

Please, don't set a novel in 2011 and have the plot turn on finding a payphone. Setting is more than time and place. It includes the clothing worn, the technology, the language.

#### 8) Inconsistencies in Tone

There's a reason there are no pie fights in *Heart of Darkness*. Mood, tone, atmosphere must always be taken into account along with what is unfolding within the novel.

#### 9) Dialogue

Make sure your characters don't all sound alike or like the author. Check for attribution and try not to use synonyms for he said or she answered. Avoid adverbs. Beware of using dialogue for info dumps.

#### 10) Beware of Slow Pacing

Make sure to include action and movement. Too many scenes and/or chapters with characters internal musings, exposition, or pure dialogue can be death to a manuscript.

#### 11) Research

Make sure of your facts. Is the building where you say it is? Does the gun your murderer uses shoot five or six bullets? It is important for the author to know more than the reader about his research. Avoid the temptation to dump all you've researched into the manuscript.

#### 12) Emotional and Thematic Resonance.

Is the book about what you wanted it to be about when you began? Does it have the emotional impact you intended it to have?

If you take some or all of the steps I have outlined above, it cannot help but make you a better, more polished writer.

*Reed Farrel Coleman is the author of 14 novels, and a former Executive Vice President of MWA. He has won Macavity, Barry, and Anthony Awards, is a three-time winner of the Shamus Award, and has twice been nominated for an Edgar® Award.*

# Seven steps that will help you create your novel

By Jess Lourey

*I've got a great idea for a novel — it's a heart-pounding adventure and the main character is young, she's on a mirror planet where she possesses magical powers, and she's a hamster.*



This is a snippet from a conversation I had with a guest at a recent book signing. As our chat continued, it became clear he was passionate about his hamster adventure and had devoted many brain-hours to fleshing it out.

"How far along is it?" I asked.

"What?"

"Your novel," I said. "How many pages have you typed?"

"Oh, I'm no writer, as much as I'd like to be. I just come up with the ideas. That's the hard part, right?"

While there're a lot of things wrong with this conversation (start with "hamster adventure" and work your way to "that's the hard part, right?"), the one that stuck with me was this: "I'm no writer." This guy was so juiced about his concept that he shared it with perfect strangers, yet he had no idea how to translate it into a novel.

I can't tell you how many people just like him that I've encountered on book tours and in my classroom. These are people who dream of turning their unique idea into a book but are too intimidated by the process to take that first step. Or, they start writing and soon become overwhelmed and demoralized.

Those interactions are what motivated me to create the Pyramid on Point method, a seven-step novel-creating method which I've taught at MWA University across the country. I'll outline the steps below.

**1. Summarize your novel in one sentence.** Begin the process by distilling your idea into its purest form, the point on your pyramid. Don't include specific names or places at this stage. To paraphrase fellow MWA instructor Reed Farrel Coleman, this sentence should be what your books is about, not what happens in your book.

It's tempting to put lots of detail in the one-sentence summary. Your idea is complex, your characters multi-faceted, your setting diverse and pivotal. How can you condense all that to a handful of words? I understand the challenge. Here is my first attempt at crafting a guiding

one-sentence summary for *November Storm*, a book I wrote for the Murder-by-Month series:

Mira James, new PI license and a copy of *Private Investigation for Dummies* in hand, is asked to look into a suspicious hunting accident in northern Minnesota and instead uncovers a secret that threatens to topple the community. Meanwhile, another dead body is thrown into her path, and forced to juggle a budding relationship with blue-eyed Johnny Leeson with an uncomfortable attraction to Gary Wohnt, local police chief, and her kinetic sidekick, Mrs. Berns, flies the coop, leaving Mira to work it out on her own.

Besides being one sentence too long, the above summary includes extraneous detail that is important to me but not crucial to the metaplot. The goal of Step 1 in this writing pyramid is to take an aerial snapshot of the novel, capturing only the large structure. After I cut away the subplots, supporting characters, and superficial detail, I am left with this summary of *November Storm*:

A newly-minted Minnesota PI investigates a suspicious hunting accident, uncovering a brutal small-town secret.

If you craft this sentence well, not only will you give your entire writing process a boost, but you will also have a powerful selling line to use with a future agent or potential reader.

**2. Expand the one-sentence summary into a full paragraph.** Include the status quo at the beginning of the novel, what obstacles the protagonist encounters, and how the novel ends. This isn't the time for secrets. Lay it all out. If it is helpful, freewrite or mindmap, using key names or phrases from your Step 1 sentence as your launch point. Here is what Step 2 could look like for H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (spoiler alert):

The book opens with the Time Traveler dining with peers in late 1800s England, where he is trying to convince them that he's invented a time machine. His guests are naturally skeptical. They arrange to dine again in a week, and when they return, the Time Traveler tells them he's visited the future. He discovered two humanoid races remaining on the planet: the beautiful, and childlike Eloi, and the subterranean, haunted Morlocks. He explains his idyllic time eating fruit with the Eloi and exploring the area, followed by his discovery that the Morlocks raise and harvest the Eloi like cattle. He ends by describing his escape from the time period, including his burning of the forest, wresting of his time machine from the Morlocks, and the loss of Weena, his Eloi friend. Distraught, he travels further into the future where he witnesses the death of humanity and the planet. Finally, he returns to the time period he left, providing an exotic flower from Weena as proof of his travels.

*Continued on Page 6*

## Seven steps, continued from page 5

Note that the ending must be given away to make this paragraph work. This summary is for your eyes only, and it's dynamic. You'll find yourself returning to tweak it as you continue down the writing pyramid, and that's okay. Revising as new ideas occur is one of the exciting elements of writing.

**3. Invite your characters.** You've taken a snapshot of your novel's point (Step 1) and created a rudimentary outline of how to get there (Step 2). Now it's time to create a sourcebook, or character bible, profiling each of the significant characters. I handwrite my character bibles, but a computer works just as well. Devote at least one page to each character. Include the following information on his/her page:

- *Name and age*
- *Basic physical characteristics.*
- *Personality traits and their source.* For example, is the character lazy because her mother always picked up after her, or does he love baseball because it's the only game his father ever played with him?
- *Quirks.* These are one or two imperfections that make your character human, such as a tendency to hum when nervous.
- *Goals and motivation.* Ask yourself what your character wants and why s/he wants it.
- *Conflict and growth.* How is this character going to be different at the end of this novel than at the beginning, and what will drive this change?
- *General storyline.* Draft a three- to five-sentence summary of the character's story arc; this will be a character-specific version of the novel summary you wrote in Step 2.

Remember that you as the author always need to know more about your characters than your reader ever sees. This inside information allows you to create a multi-dimensional, internally consistent population for your novel. Beware that Step 3 is an easy place to get sidetracked; keep your character outlines to one page per so this process doesn't morph from novel writing to scrapbooking.

**4. Sketch your setting.** If you don't yet have a notebook for this novel, now's the time to purchase one. You want to physically draw the neighborhood(s) and interior space(s) where most of your story will take place. No fear—you don't need to be an artist to do this. If you're sketching a room, just chicken scratch the major pieces of furniture and placement of windows and doors, as well as which direction is north. If your book is set mostly in a neighborhood or town, sketch out the relevant cross streets and put labeled boxes where you imagine all the businesses and/or houses to be. The setting sketches anchor your writing and allow you to maintain congruity in your place descriptions. If you have

space, staple in a photo or two if you come across an image that visually captures a component of your setting.

**5. Develop each sentence in Step 2 to a full page description.** Include at least two sound, two smell, and two feel details on each page. For example, let's take the first sentence of *The Time Machine* summary I created in Step 2:

"The book opens with the Time Traveler dining with learned peers in late 1800s England, where he is trying to convince them that he's invented a time machine."

If I were to expand this to one page, I would describe their clothes, the smell and flavor of the food they're eating, the feel of the tablecloth under their hands, the clank of their forks on their plates. I would include preliminary research into the political issues, mores, and scientific breakthroughs of England in the late 1800s so I could include accurate conversational topics and make sure I got their clothes and hairstyles correct. Specific to the topic of a time machine, I'd brainstorm and roughly outline the give-and-take that would occur if someone told me they'd invented a time machine. Do this for every sentence in Step 2.

**6. Roughly outline the novel.** Remember the words of Robert Frost: "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." A chapter-by-chapter, detailed outline is laborious to create and cobbles the creative drive when it comes time to actually write the novel. I recommend instead generating a rough outline that highlights only the major conflicts and character interactions, essentially a more complex version of the summary you completed in Step 2. This "big picture" outlining allows you to always have something exciting to write toward without eliminating the joy of discovering what your characters will do when left to their own devices.

**7. Write the novel.** This is it. The training wheels are off. You have a snapshot of your novel and a rough map for creating it. You know which characters you're bringing with, what they'll face, and in what locations they'll face it. Start writing the story from the beginning, and don't stop until you have a complete first draft of your manuscript.

Writing a novel really is that straightforward when you break it into the seven manageable steps of the writing pyramid. Good luck! And please, consider taking one of the MWA-University classes in your area for a full day of top-notch writing instruction at a reasonable price. Along with workshopping the above process, you'll learn how to craft stronger characters and dialogue, create cinematic settings and gripping plots, edit skillfully, and prepare for the writer's life.

*Jess Lourey, one of the MWA-U instructors, is the author of the Lefty-nominated Murder-by-Month mysteries. She has taught writing and sociology at the college level since 1998.*

# The importance of setting

By Daniel Stashower

*"The rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets, rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness. Through one of the obscurest quarters of London, and among haunts little loved by the gentlemen of the police, a man, evidently of the lowest orders, was wending his solitary way."*

Now that's a reasonably atmospheric piece of scene-setting, right? I mean, in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century sort of way. Is it Wilkie Collins, do you think? Poe? Hang on, let me check the notes — oh, wait! I forgot to read the opening line. Bear with me for a minute . . . yes . . . here it is, the opening line of that passage is: *"It was a dark and stormy night."*

We live in a precarious world, where a few simple words can make a reputation or skewer it. The wisdom of the ages tells us that this passage is not only bad, it's famously bad. Majestically bad. Moose Murders bad. But can we look at these lines and say — in clear, quantifiable, analytical terms — why the passage is such a stinker?

Of all the topics covered in the MWA University workshops — Structure, Character, Editing — I believe that Setting is the one that's hardest to define. It's like rack and pinion steering, or the Electoral College, or any of those many other things we think we understand until it comes time to cough up a definition. We know it's important; we're just not 100% sure how it works.

Here's what it's not. It's not about whether you should set your book in a small town or a big city, or whether you should choose the real-life mean streets of Los Angeles or some fictional realm of your own, like St. Mary Mead.

Of course these are important decisions in the life of any writer, but setting is something more than a simple time or place.

We've all heard the buzzwords. "Setting as character." "Creating a milieu." "Connecting character to place." All of this is important, as we wend our solitary way through the obscurest quarters of London, but there's also something organic that has to be there from the first line.

Used properly, setting is a tool that advances your agenda on every front and contains mirror elements of character, mood, tone, theme and more besides, helping you to hook your reader in ways that may not be obvious on the surface, but will exert a kind of emotional undertow. If you're doing it right, you will make your readers *feel* things.

By now you're saying to yourself, this is all quite interesting in a pedantic sort of way, but what does Elmore Leonard think about it? As it happens, Elmore Leonard stirred up something of a hornet's nest a few years ago with his 10 Rules for Writers, several of which were aimed squarely at this subject.

"Never open a book with weather," Mr. Leonard advises. Also: "Don't go into great detail describing places and things." And, my personal favorite: "Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip." He candidly admits that this last one sounds pretty glib, but he goes on to explain what he's getting at:

"Think of what you skip reading a novel: thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them. What the writer is doing, he's writing, perpetrating hooptedoodle, perhaps taking another shot at the weather, or has gone into the character's head, and the reader either knows what the guy's thinking or doesn't care."

Some of that, I admit, is pretty technical — I mean, "hooptedoodle" is a subject we usually only cover at the graduate level — but I think we can all grasp the basics.

Elmore Leonard is being deliberately provocative and more than a little tongue-in-cheek, but he's absolutely right. All too often the passages where an author attempts to set the scene are the clunkiest and most disposable parts of any book: "Look Ma, I'm writing."

P.D. James has something to say about that: "The technical problems of a detective story are to me fascinating," she tells us, "how to balance setting, characterization and plot so that all three are interrelated and contribute to the whole . . . Setting, important in any work of fiction, is particularly so in a detective story. It establishes atmosphere, influences plot and character and enhances the horror of murder, sometimes by contrast between the beauty and outward peace of the scene and the turbulence of human emotions. For me the novel invariably begins with the setting."

For me, what jumps out there is her instance that setting must "interrelate and contribute" to the whole, to all of the other elements of storytelling.

I take that to mean that each element of your setting must work on more than one level. Not simply a flat, overly literal description — "It was a dark and stormy night" — but something that pulls the narrative in the direction of your story, characters and themes.

That's the difference between something that's integral to the story and something that Elmore Leonard would flip past. So, how does P.D. James do this? Here's her detective Adam Dalgliesh approaching a crime scene in *A Taste for Death*:

*Before he concentrated on the actual scene of the crime, Dalgliesh always liked to make a cursory survey of the surroundings to orientate himself and, as it were, to set the scene of murder. That exercise had its practical value, but he recognized that, in some obscure way, it fulfilled a psychological need. Just so in boyhood he would explore a country church by first walking slowly round it before, with a frisson of awe and*

Continued on page 8

## Setting, continued from page 7

*excitement, pushing open the door and beginning his planned progress of discovery.*

That's probably as close as P.D. James has ever come to telling the reader in plain terms what she's up to. "The promise of discovery." "The frisson of awe and excitement." Dalglish is setting the scene by describing the setting of a scene. Somehow it works, conveying the sense of "I can't wait to see what happens next."

Let's consult one more expert. I wonder, could Edgar Allan Poe possibly have something instructive to say? Why, yes, I find that he does. In a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-told Tales*, Poe spoke of the ideal workings of a literary artist:

*If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentences tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.*

That sounds pretty good in theory, but how does it work in practice? Let's join one of Poe's unnamed narrators as he contemplates the ancestral home of his friend Roderick Usher, one of the "boon companions of his boyhood," who has sent a mysterious summons in which he speaks of nervous agitation and mental disorder:

*I know not how it was — but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit . . . I looked upon the scene before me — upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain — upon the bleak walls — upon the vacant eye-like windows — upon a few rank sedges — and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees — with an utter depression of soul . . . What was it — I paused to think — what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discolouration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves . . . Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.*

Vacant eye-like windows. A place where everything appears solid until you look closely and see signs of decay, especially under the roof. One would almost think that Poe is trying to tell us something. Later in the story — spoiler alert — we discover that all is not well with Roderick Usher and his tenderly beloved sister Madeline. We begin to suspect that the title of the story — *The Fall of the House of Usher* — can be taken on more than one level.

And in the final stages, as Poe rushes us outside — under a blood-red moon, no less — we have cause to remember that barely perceptible zig-zag fissure, as the house cracks open

and the fragments are pulled into the earth, which closes "sullenly and silently" over the last vestiges of the house of Usher.

It all works just as Poe said it should. You even hear some of the same words he used at the beginning, as he set the scene, repeated at the end to underscore the horror of what has happened. His very initial sentences have tended toward the "outbringing" of his effect.

During the MWA University sessions we spend a fair amount of time on what I call the "Goofus and Gallant" portion of the workshops, in which we look at effective illustrations of setting and description and compare them with other, perhaps less successful examples.

See if you can spot the differences in the two passages below. The first is drawn from an obscure work called *The Holcomb Horror*, by a now-forgotten author named Norm D. Plume, and the second is the opening paragraph of Truman Capote's masterful *In Cold Blood*. First, Mr. Plume:

*Holcomb, Kansas, has a population of 2,026 people. It is located in Finney County, in the western part of the state, and the median income per household is \$47,115. The principal crops are wheat, corn and soybeans. The land is very flat, allowing visitors to see for miles in every direction. The locals take pride in the appearance of their village. At a recent meeting of the town council it was decided to approve a \$23,000 ordinance to beautify the sidewalks outside the county buildings with a pebbled concrete border.*

Very informative, right? Now try this:

*The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.*

I don't know about you, but I hear music in those lines. Every word rings with authority, from the beautiful word choices — the "barbed" accent; the "hard blue skies" — to the deceptively simple accumulation of detail that builds to the apt and surprising image of the Greek temple.

"To me," Capote once said, "the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the inner music that words make."

Something to think about, on a dark and stormy night.

*Daniel Stashower is an acclaimed biographer and narrative historian, and winner of the Edgar, Agatha, and Anthony awards, as well as the recipient of the Raymond Chandler Fulbright Fellowship in Detective Fiction. His most recent book is The Hour of Peril.*

# Plotting is more than sequencing scenes

By Hallie Ephron

As I was planning to teach my first session for MWA University on dramatic structure and plot, I thought a lot about what works in a mystery novel and what doesn't.

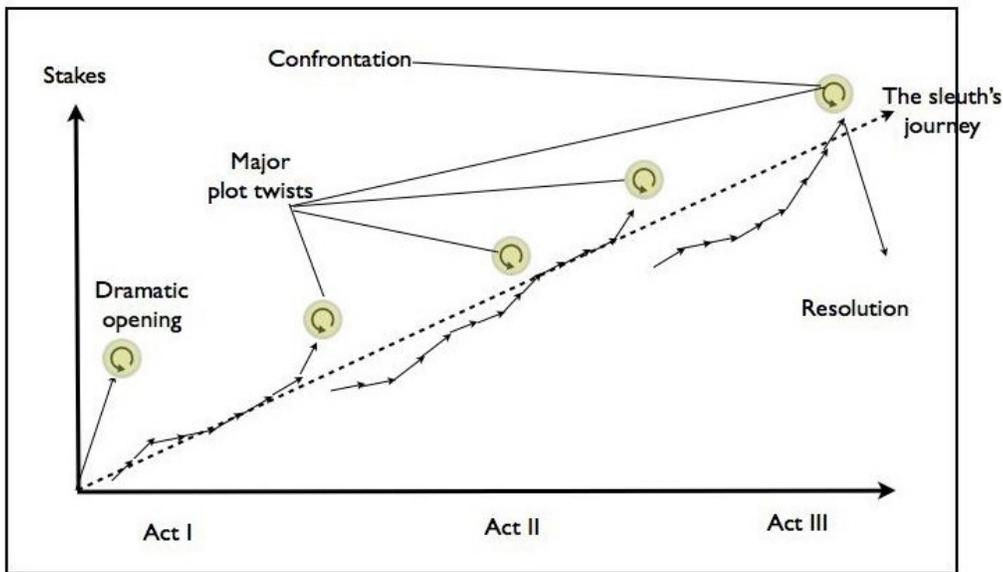
After all, I write them. I read gobs of them. Is plotting simply sequencing scenes?

If only. Because then they'd be a whole lot easier to write.

But nothing loses me faster in a mystery novel than a plot in which this happens, and then this happens, and then this happens, and things just keep on happening but there's no tension building. That's a plot that's circling the drain instead of heading toward the finish line.

So, how do you build in forward momentum? It helps to pay attention to something as basic and ancient as the three-act structure.

This diagram shows how the plot of a mystery novel can be laid out in three acts.



- Across horizontal axis are the pages of the novel, separated into acts.
- The vertical axis is rising stakes, and with them, tension.
- The little arrows represent scenes strung together (of course there are more of them in an actual novel) and grouped into three acts.
- The dashed line is the journey of the main character (the sleuth).
- The curly arrows are major plot twists, surprises that change the direction of the story and reversals that leave the sleuth's investigation back at square one.

- The plot is framed by a dramatic opening at the start and resolution at the end.

## An opening that hooks

There is no one-size-fits-all way to to open a mystery novel. It might open with a dramatization of the crime that starts the story rolling. Or maybe a scene from the past that sets a context. Or maybe it's a scene that introduces an intriguing main character and establishes some of the elements needed for the mystery to unfold.

Whatever it is, the essential role of the opening scene is to get the reader interested enough to keep reading.

The opening scene sets up the mystery, and often poses an *unanswered question* that got answered by the novel's end.

For example, here are brief descriptions of a few dramatic openings and the questions they posed:

- A baby is found abandoned on the steps of a church.

- *Unanswered question:* Who left the baby on the church steps, and what happened to the baby's mother? (*In the Bleak Midwinter*, Julia Spencer-Fleming)

- A criminal defense attorney meets her new client — a woman accused of killing her cop-boyfriend. The woman extends a hand and says, "Pleased to meet you, I'm your twin."

- *Unanswered question:* Is this woman the defense attorney's twin sister and is she a murderer? (*Mistaken Identity*, Lisa Scottoline)

- PI Bill Smith receives a late night telephone call from the NYPD, who are holding his fifteen-year-old nephew Gary.

- *Unanswered question:* Why would Gary ask for Smith? Smith hasn't seen Gary for years and is estranged from Gary's parents. (*Winter and Night*, S. J. Rozan)

Bottom line: write an opening that captures the reader's attention without shooting yourself in the foot. Here are a few of the mistakes that are all too easy to make:

- *Stealing the novel's thunder:* An opening that is fabulously exciting all right, but it reveals something that serves the overall novel better by being revealed later.

Continued on page 10

## Structure and plot, *continued from page 9*

- *False promises*: An opening that feels stylistically at odds with the scenes that follow.
- *Too much too soon*: An opening with so much graphic sex, gruesome violence, or profanity that it turns many readers off; writers can get away with going over the top in all these categories without losing readers once they've gotten their story rolling and earned their reader's trust.

### Giving your sleuth a hard time

What unifies a mystery novel is that dashed line in the diagram: the sleuth's quest. Drama works in direct proportion to how miserable you make your protagonist. Roadblocks and setbacks make it an interesting journey.

Here are some ways to plague your protagonist:

- *Discomfort*: The hungrier, thirstier, colder (or hotter), achier, and generally more pissed off he becomes, the more heroic the quest. Give him a scraped knee, sprained ankle, dislocated finger, bloody nose, broken arm, or gunshot wound, and show how he pushes past pain and disability in order to continue his pursuit.

Make sure the reader knows he feels the pain, but be careful about letting him bitch and moan too much about it — no one likes a whiny hero.

- *Inner demons*: If you throw your character into a snake-filled pit, be sure to establish beforehand that she's terrified of snakes. If your character is an alcoholic, make his quest for the killer take him into bars.

If your character is devoted to his brother, give him a blind spot that makes him unable to face the evidence mounting incriminating his brother.

- *Mishaps*: Throw obstacles at your character to slow him down. His car can break down, or he can be set upon by thugs who turn out to be protecting the villain, or his car can roll over and end up in a ditch after being nudged off the highway by a semi. After each setback, the sleuth comes back stronger and more determined.

So give your character trouble, and have some of it be of his own making. But modulate the misery. Begin with minor woes and build as the story progresses to its final climax. From time to time, things should improve.

Then, just when it looks as if your protagonist is out of the woods, let the next disaster befall him.

Finally, keep raising the stakes, insert a ticking clock, and above all, make it personal. Reaching the end goal should feel heroic, worth all the pain and misery your protagonist had to overcome along the way.

### Confrontation at the end

Mystery novels culminate in a climactic scene in which

the final shoes drop and the puzzle is solved. That climactic scene contains the payload for the entire novel. It's one of the most important scenes in your book — second only to the dramatic opening.

Often that scene is fraught with mortal danger as a clock ticks down. The sleuth and the villain duke it out, face to face — if not physically, then verbally.

After the climax comes a coda, a more contemplative scene in which the reader gets a chance to breathe again and mull over what happened.

In most mysteries, the protagonist triumphs, the villain is defeated, and justice is served. The ending should be plausible, surprising, and most importantly, satisfying.

Don't feel rule-bound if some unusual ending suits your story, but whatever you do, be sure that in the end it is crystal clear whodunit, why, and how. Your reader should never be left scratching his head.

By the end, too, the protagonist has completed a journey, solved the puzzle, and often come to terms with some unfinished issue from his own past.

Finally, here are a few endings to avoid:

- *Duh*: This ending is obvious to everyone but the sleuth.
- *Over the top*: An overdose of violence that feels out of proportion to the rest of the book.
- *You've got to be kidding*: The villain is the least likely suspect, one who would seem to be incapable of this crime (an anorexic teeny-bopper strangler).
- *Spill all*: The villain, for no apparent reason, begins to talk-talk-talk, spilling every detail about the crime.
- *If only I'd known*: Yeah, the reader could have solved it, too, if the sleuth hadn't withheld key information.
- *Yeah, right*: Some key part of the solution is due to a coincidence.
- *But, but, but*: The ending that fails to tie up all the loose ends and explain how and why everything happened.

Hallie Ephron is the author of the Edgar-nominated *Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel: How to Knock 'Em Dead with Style* and of *suspense novels including Come and Find Me and Never Tell a Lie*.



Hallie Ephron

# Setting in fiction: from drafting to writing to revising

by John Galligan

A useful analogy for the role of setting in fiction is the role of water in the world around us. What does this mean?

In good fiction, setting is *everywhere*, playing a life-sustaining role. Often setting is bluntly apparent — as water is obvious in a lake.

At this level, setting is a conscious choice by the writer made during the pre-writing phase of the writing process.

*I am going to set my story in Milwaukee, during the winter of 1975.* During the drafting phase, various elements of setting will be deliberately staged by the writer.

But when writers revise — after drafts are done — it can be helpful to extend the setting-as-water analogy further by considering, for example, that our own bodies can be as much seventy-five percent water, as much as ten gallons inside a full-grown man.

How much of this water is evident to the casual observer? Right. Little or none.

Even our ten-gallon man himself is not aware of much more than the pint or two that might be in his bladder.

Does it make sense to think of a novel, in the end, as being similarly saturated with setting? Weighted with setting? Alive on account of setting? Or dehydrated, struggling to survive?

A writer-in-revision can extend the analogy further by thinking of a novel as a tree. This is a different and productive direction to take the analogy because of the rootedness of the tree, and because of the way setting relates to aspects of fiction such as character.

Everything about a tree is an expression of where and how it is rooted, and the tree's roots, of course, are its connection to water.

Why is the tree rooted where it is? What accounts for its size? Its health? Its rate of growth? Its output of flowers and fruit? Its survival through hostile conditions? Right.

There are other factors of course. But water is a major part of every answer. *Everything about the tree is determined or affected by water. Even though we can't see the water.*

Could we say, for example, that *Everything about a character is determined or affected by setting? Even though the reader can't necessarily see the connection?*

Time to close the analogy and think about its consequences:

- 1) Setting should infuse every dimension of your fiction. It must, if your fiction is to be authentic and alive.
- 2) Setting grounds, feeds, and supports your fiction, mostly in subtle ways that may not be evident to

your reader.

- 3) Setting too copiously or carelessly applied can stunt or kill your fiction.

Now, to the topic of revision.

On good days, many essential subtleties of setting will emerge organically as you draft.

Quite likely, however, many more will need to be crafted or refined during the revision phase of the writing process.

So, how can we think about setting in a thorough and analytical way? How can we improve our fiction to benefit from the full power of setting?

Caution: this is NOT a mindset you want to encourage while you are drafting, or tapping into your imagination to create the raw material for a story.

Writing is a *process* with different phases and steps, requiring different disciplines and states of mind. Know where you are in the process. Behave accordingly. Enough said?

A helpful first step is to "spread out" setting into its components or dimensions.

**Place:** This is the obvious one, like water is obvious in a lake. Place is what most people think of when they think about setting. *Where?* But to keep scenes rooted in place, writers need to play the entire "scale of where," from the "big" where down to the "microscopic" where.

One brilliant detail might nail the whole scale. That's what we revise for.

**Time:** Another obvious aspect of setting, but with often-overlooked dimensions. Again, there is the "scale of when." There is time in history, time of year, time of day, time of life, and there is always, internally, a "time of story" dimension wherein change-over-time (or lack of) is demonstrated through the writer's handling of details.

Again, our quest is for those images, those actions, those details, those lines of dialogue, that run the "scale of when."

**Mood/Theme:** Now we embrace a more subliminal impact of setting. Most writers have done the exercise of describing the same thing twice, once in a positive light, once in a negative. The setting of a small town destroyed by a tornado is not a monolith, mood-wise.

Despair, opportunity, loss, release, awe, giddiness, mortification — any of these moods and/or themes, and infinitely more, are expressible in the way a setting is perceived and conveyed.

And this leads us to ...

**Character:** Think of the tree. Think of the man full of

Continued on page 12

## Setting in fiction, *continued from page 12*

water. Setting shapes us, both in terms of who we are now, today, and who, in reaction to the storyline ahead, we will become. Setting infuses — maybe even determines — the way our characters walk, talk, dress, eat, think, react, and just about everything else.

One of the great sources of tension in fiction, of course, is a character who is *of* one setting (though perhaps unaware of it) and finds himself uncomfortably in another.

**Pace:** Setting shows up in pacing, too, because writers have to manage and manipulate time. Instead of going blow-by-blow from beginning to end, fiction generally hopskips by scenes, which are concrete units of time and place (our first two dimensions of setting).

*A change in scene is a change in setting* — a jump, with transition or not, to another time and/or place.

One way to think of a story is as a *finite arrangement of settings that contain linked dramatic actions*. Words are a writer's capital. Spending too much capital in one setting, not enough in another, creates imbalance and is an example of a pacing problem.

How does your story move from one setting to another? Why those settings? How is each setting integral to the actions and characters within? How efficiently can the setting be conveyed across all the relevant dimensions?

### It all comes down to details, and choices.

Writers have to make choices. We can't describe everything. If we try to include too much detail in our settings, we take a good thing (water) and create bad things (floods, drownings).

So, in revision, what are the most critical aspects of setting, the ones you cannot do without? What are the most

powerful details, the ones that convey the most information about your time-and-place but also resonate across the other dimensions of setting? What setting-related details might be creating static in your fiction? What can you do without?

### Setting Circle: An Awareness Tool for Authors

Each of the quadrants in the circle represents an important dimension of setting. All dimensions are interrelated. Each quadrant has two zones, one for the "what" (the abstraction, or idea, that you want to convey) and the other for the "how" (the concrete detail — the image — that you choose to convey the idea).

For example, "late summer" is a "what" in the Time quadrant (an idea about setting that you want to convey);

"silver maples humming with cicadas" is a "how" (a description conveying the idea).

Strive for consistency, richness, synergy, and economy as you describe your settings. Work for details that cross boundaries in the circle, doing double or triple duty.

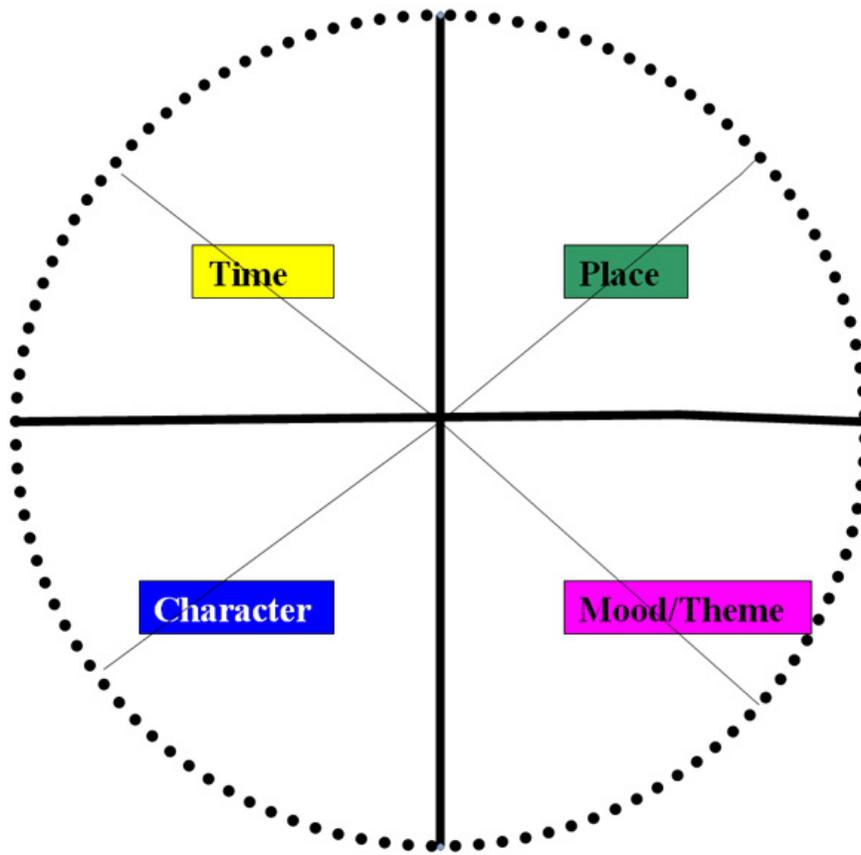
For example, note that "silver maples humming with cicadas" is a *multi-dimensional* image, because in addition to time it also conveys information about Place and

Mood/Theme.

That sound is certainly not "humming" to everyone all the time!

John Galligan, *Tools for Fiction Writers*, 2009

John Galligan is the author of five novels, including most recently *The Wind Knot* (2011). He teaches writing at Madison College in Madison, Wisconsin.



# Conflict needed for character and plot

by Laura DiSilverio

*No doubt there are other important things in life besides conflict, but there are not many other things so inevitably interesting.*

-Robert Lynd, *The Blue Lion*

Early in my writing career, I was lucky enough to get selected for a semester-long mentorship program with the *NYT* bestselling writer David Liss. He read my manuscript — which eventually got me an agent, but which we never sold — and told me I didn't have enough conflict. I needed to make things much harder, all the time, for my protagonist. That was, perhaps, the best writing advice I ever got.

As Saul Alinsky, the writer and founder of modern community organizing, says "Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict." It's at the heart of any storytelling, no matter the genre. Yet, many writers shy away from it. We like our characters too much to make their lives miserable. That attitude can derail our storytelling.

## Types of Conflict:

I define conflict as **anything and everything that keeps the viewpoint character(s) from accomplishing his or her goals, or makes it more difficult for him or her to achieve them.** I'm assuming a knowledge of the basic classes of conflict we all learned in high school lit class (man vs man, man vs nature, man vs self, man vs society, etc.) so we can delve into specific types of conflict and how to insert them in your novel.

In fact, you do more than insert them: **you use conflict to drive the novel, both in terms of plot and character development.**

**Underlying conflict (what I like to call "chronic conflict"):** An ongoing problem for the protag. It may be his relationship with his dad or having to take care of an Alzheimer-ridden mom. It may be a bum leg or dyslexia. It may be a feud with her next-door neighbor or a boss who demeans her. This type of conflict can undergird an entire series and may or may not ever be totally resolved; it can wax and wane, get better and worse.

**Internal character conflict:** This can be a character flaw or mindset that the protag struggles to overcome. Maybe she's racist but must work with someone she's prejudiced against. Maybe he's an alcoholic or she has a temper problem. Again, this kind of conflict can carry through several books or a series. Usually, readers will want to see the protag make some progress on their problem, although there can be relapses. If writing a standalone book, you'll probably have to force your character to make significant progress on his or her issue within that one book.

**Transient conflict:** Like it sounds, this kind of conflict is temporary, brief, frequently resolved without the protag

taking steps to overcome it. Some examples would be traffic jams keeping the protag from an important meeting/event, weather doing the same, a warp drive that malfunctions at the wrong moment, a project at work that keeps the protag from getting to his son's baseball game... You get the idea. This is a good type of conflict to potentially include in a scene that doesn't otherwise have enough conflict.

**Central Conflict or Plot-Centric Conflict:** This is the major conflict of the book, the challenge that must be overcome (or that must defeat the protag if you're writing that kind of book). Isolate the central question of your book, and you've found the central conflict. Will the girl get the guy? Will the magician save the kingdom? Will the detective catch the murderer? Will the boy come to terms with his mother's death? Will the sisters become friends again?

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Most, if not all, novels will have some of each of these kinds of conflict layered in.

**Techniques for Increasing Conflict (in every scene and across the scope of the story or novel):**

**Define the viewpoint character's goals and needs in each scene** — This may sound pretty basic, but if you can't articulate the protag's overarching goals for the novel and particular goals for each scene, you're going to have trouble inserting conflict, something to keep him or her from achieving the goal. Goals can be either explicit and external (my detective needs to find out where the suspect was when the murder happened) or something internal which the protag may or may not be aware of. For instance, the detective's explicit goal, which he is aware of, is to see if the suspect has an alibi. The internal goal might be to impress the suspect with his intelligence, or suss out if the suspect finds him attractive, or needle the suspect because she reminds him of his ex-wife.

• **Exercise:** As painful as it sounds, you must analyze each scene and determine the goal or goals. Jot down a phrase or two that encapsulates each goal. You can try this during the outline stage, but it works a lot better for me during revision. (If you can't figure out what the goal is, but you're sure the scene is important, ask a critique group buddy what he or she thinks. If no one can spot a goal, the scene is a good candidate for cutting!)

**Provide internal and/or external opposition to those goals** — If you're an outliner, you can pencil in this kind of conflict before writing the scenes. If you're a seat-of-the-pantser (like me) you may have to add a lot of this opposition during revision.

Using the example from above, where the detective needs to find out if the suspect has an alibi, you can introduce action or dialog that interferes with any of the goals on any level. For instance, the suspect can refuse to talk to the detective. She can insist on having a lawyer present which

## Enhancing conflict, *continued from Page 14*

creates the conflict of delay. She might lie. She could find him amusing when he tries to needle her, or make it clear she finds him unattractive, both of which conflict with his internal goals.

See how it works? A gas leak could force both of them from the building before he gets his answers. Her husband could come home, misinterpret the scene, and sock the detective in the nose. This opposition can be external and explicit (a sock in the nose) or internal and implicit (the detective may find himself unable to push the suspect for answers because he finds her attractive or feels sorry for her).

**Surprise with disappointment and setbacks** — Your protag can't go straight to the goal. If that worked, Harry would have killed Voldemort in *The Sorcerer's Stone*. She must suffer disappointments and setbacks, get halfway up the mountain and fall back a hundred feet, have a great first date followed by no phone call, recover the gun used in the killing but find no fingerprints on it, find the missing treasure, but get robbed. Remember, disappointments and setbacks can work with any layer of conflict, from the central conflict to a chronic conflict or internal character conflict.

If things are going well for the protag in the main story line, consider introducing setbacks and disappointments in a subplot (protag needs to find a good nursing home for mom with Alzheimer's and they're all too expensive), or for a secondary character. Switch that up: When the protag finds a suitable nursing home, things need to get tough for her relative to the central plot.

- **Exercise:** Jot a timeline of your novel's main events/actions. Look for places where your protag is making progress toward his or her goal. Pick two or three places to insert a setback or disappointment.

Work with a "What Could Be Worse?" (WCBW)

**mindset.** The need for this harks back to what I said earlier: We don't like to cause our protagonists pain, heartbreak, trouble, or even inconvenience. Get over it! We need to shovel conflict upon conflict into our heroes' lives. You can do this during initial drafting or revision. What's an example of WCBW? Say your protag's husband is missing, and that's one of the story's central conflicts. WCBW? Maybe she's pregnant and due any day. Maybe there are complications to the pregnancy. Maybe she goes into labor and her car won't start or there's a snowstorm or tsunami. Maybe the baby is alien spawn and she can't risk letting it be born—depends what genre you're writing! Maybe she's got an important presentation to give at work and tries to get through that before going to the hospital (could have humorous moments). You get the idea.

- **Exercise:** Find a moment in your novel or story where things are bad for your protag. You might even go for the nadir, the dark night of the soul where your protag's at his or her lowest point. Now, make things worse. Write the central conflict of this scene/moment in the center of the page. Brainstorm ways to make the situation worse--emotionally, physically, mentally, professionally, personally. Don't censor yourself. Write things down as they come to you--without worrying about plausibility or how you'll get your protag out of this jam. When you've done that, you can go back and winnow out the ridiculous ideas, choosing one or two to add to your story and deepen the conflict.

You may not want to create conflict in your own life, but it is a useful — and needed — writing tool!

*Laura DiSilverio, a former Air Force intelligence officer, writes the Mall Cop mystery series (Berkley Prime Crime), as well as the Swift Investigations humorous PI series (Minotaur). She taught writing and literature at the Air Force Academy and now enjoys teaching at writing conferences and seminars.*

---

## MWA-U Recommended Reading

*The Writing Life*  
by Annie Dillard (Harper) 1990

*Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel*  
by Hallie Ephron (Writers Digest Books)  
September 2005

*On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*  
by Stephen King (Pocket) July 2002

*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*  
by Anne Lamott (Anchor) September 1995

*Elmore Leonard's 10 Rules of Writing*  
by Elmore Leonard (William Morrow) 2007

*The Fire in Fiction: Passion, Purpose and Techniques to Make your Novel Great*  
by Donald Maass (Writers Digest Books) May 2009

*Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*  
by Francine Prose (Harper) 2007

*The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*  
3rd Edition, by Christopher Vogler  
(Michael Wiese Productions) 2007

# Purpose of dialogue is more than to inform

By Catriona McPherson

Reading good dialogue is some of the best fun to be had when you open a book. Reading bad dialogue makes kind people cringe and cruel people cackle with scorn.

And really, who wants to make their readers cringe or cackle?

The good news about bad dialogue is that it's almost always bad because of one of a few common problems.

## The Purpose of Dialogue

It's really important to keep in mind that the purpose of dialogue for the writer and reader — call it purpose *for* the book — is different from the purpose of talk for the characters: purpose *in* the book.

### 1. For the book

For the writer and reader, dialogue does two things that narration and description can't manage alone.

First, it breaks up the prose; it breathes life into a story; it's refreshing to the eye and brain. No one trying to decide between sleep and more reading ever turned a page, saw dialogue and switched off their lamp.

But, above all, what dialogue does is reveal character. It's the ultimate show-don't-tell.

On the second page of Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone*, Harold joins his sister Ree on the porch and looks over to where their neighbors have hung venison to age in the trees.

"Maybe Blond Milton'll bring us by one to eat."

"That could be."

"Don't kin ought to."

"That's what is always said."

"Could be we could ask."

...

"Never. Never ask for what ought to be offered."

From fewer than forty words of dialogue we know that Ree Dolly is poor, strong, worried, caring and off-the-scale proud — and we're ready to set off on the journey of the novel completely bound up in her concerns.

Take a page of your dialogue, knock off the attribution tags, mix up the speeches and see if you can still tell who said what. If not you need to work on distinguishing your characters. How? Read on.

### 2. In the Book

From the point of view of the characters themselves, what is talk for?

Well, just as in the real world, it's hardly ever to exchange

information. Or at least not only for that. It's to connect, to cement relationships, to kick back, for comfort, to impress, to seduce, to intimidate, to avoid awkward silences.

A good rule of thumb would be to make sure that in every dialogue where information is exchanged, at least one of these other things is being done *by every character*.

In short. . .

## Golden Rule: everyone has an agenda.

For a masterclass in conflicting agendas and the way they make dialogue fizzle, look no further than Joy Fielding, e.g. *Kiss Mommy Goodbye*; you've never seen passive aggression like it.

So you want characters revealing themselves willy-nilly through agenda-riddled talk that lightens your prose. What does this kind of dialogue not look like?

## What to Avoid

### 1. Stilted Language

Tin-eared, authorly language is usually too much like writing and not enough like speech — too formal in tone and too complex in structure.

Question: who was it who said "Grammatical complexity is a feature with which dialogue is not imbued"? Answer: No one. Not even Winston Churchill spoke like that off the cuff.

Structure can't be simple enough, but when it comes to formality there's a delicate balance to strike because real-life talk with its false starts, discontinuities and errors, far from being stilted, is stiltless, legless, headless and clueless too. As President Nixon said:

"Of course this is a- Hunt will- That will uncover a lot of- He had a lot of- When you open that scab there's a hell of a lot of things . . ."

**Silver rule: dialogue is a bit like speech written down, but only a bit.**

Thankfully, the world of crime fiction is fit to burst with fantastic balancers. Elmore Leonard is a good place to start. In fact, Stephen King in *On Writing* is generous enough to suggest Leonard as the go-to guy, instead of saying: "me, me! Pick me!" King and Leonard together would cover all your fabulous dialogue needs.

So we've got our characters, just trying to get by and laying themselves bare with their garbled talk. What can

Continued on Page 16

## Driving dialogue, *continued from Page 15*

they not use it to say?

### 2. Overstuffing.

Exposition belongs in the narrative, not in the dialogue. Shift too much of it over and you risk the notorious info-dump, where two characters back up their brains to each other's ears and tip out industrial loads of fact.

Like Mulder and Scully always did in *The X-files*.

This is bad dialogue. It's mediumly bad when the facts are crucial; it's unforgivable when the facts are just interesting and took a lot of library time for the author to learn.

"I can't be for sure (sic) without a microscope,' \_\_\_\_ said, 'but it looks to me like this is a *scientific-adjective plant-name* from the phylum \_\_\_\_\_. It's (sic) name means *English equivalent*. The \_\_\_\_\_ Ocean is filled with it."

(I've disguised the source of this, but probably not well enough.)

**Diamond-encrusted platinum rule: info is for sprinkling. Don't dump.**

A special sub-category of info-dump worth mentioning

is the crime against fiction known as "Say, remember when . . .?" in which one character tells another what they both know so that we overhear and find out.

And there are no loopholes. Don't even think about getting a character "so angry" that they conveniently summarise their back story. It's bad dialogue.

The worst of the info-dump (not to mention its even uglier cousin in the attic) is that it misses two birds with one stone. Not only is it terrible writing, but you've squandered a precious chance to hook readers in and make them keep reading.

Because when characters talk like people talk, the reader is teased with knowledge withheld and wants more.

I mean, for crying out loud, mystery readers are self-selected puzzle-junkies. They are guaranteed to go truffling after the missing bits. Who is Blond Milton, for instance? How could you not want to know?

*Catriona McPherson is a former linguistics professor and now full-time author of six detective novels set in Scotland in the 1920s, where — but not when — she was born. Dandy Gilver and the Proper Treatment of Bloodstains launched the series in the US last year.*

In addition to those instructors contributing to this special edition of *TTD*, MWA-U classes have also been taught by:

Megan Abbott  
Donna Andrews  
Cordelia Frances Biddle  
Rex Burns  
John Galligan  
Daniel J. Hale  
Harley Jane Kozak  
Con Lehane  
David Morrell  
R. Narvaez  
Nancy Pickard  
Kat Richardson  
Julie Smith  
Vicki Stiefel  
Brian Thornton  
Stan Trollip  
Michael Wiley



*MWA Instructors at the MWA-University held in Waukesha, WI at the Southeast Wisconsin Festival of Books, on June 17, 2011. Hank Phillippi Ryan, Jess Lourey, Reed Farrel Coleman, Megan Abbott, Larry Light, Hallie Ephron.  
Photo by Margery Flax.*

# On the edge: Writing a mystery that matters

By Claire Applewhite

*Every life is a mystery. And every story of every life is a mystery. But it is not what happens that is the mystery. It is whether it has to happen no matter what, whether it is ordered and ordained, fixed and fated, or whether it can be missed, avoided, circumvented, passed by; that is the mystery.*

Excerpt from *For the Rest of Her Life*, by Cornell Woolrich

Faulkner tells us that “All meaning in the best fiction flows from the heart in conflict within itself.” We know that without conflict, there is no story. We must emotionally invest in our characters and make the reader feel what they feel with words. This emotive state is central to good fiction writing. Yet, another question lingers. What’s at stake? Does it matter?

What is plot? Plot is composed of events. Characters interpret the events in a certain sequence through dialogue and actions. But there’s a catch: these events must be significant because they have significant consequences. Plot is the things characters do, feel, think, or say that cause those consequences. Plot is a cause that has significant effects.

Plot theory suggests five stages of plot structure:

1. A character has a problem.
2. Complications arise and conflict intensifies.
3. Crises culminate in a climax.

4. The conflict is resolved.

5. The protagonist learns something about self or life.

In the *Art of Fiction*, John Gardner introduces the concept of the Fichtean Curve (FC). The Fichtean Curve in Figure 1 represents the basic plot of a book.

The WOW reaction is defined as the moment when a person’s anticipation of a resolution deviates from an expected result. The WOW moment is experienced when the conflict is resolved, following the climax portrayed in the Fichtean Curve figure.

Examples of WOW moments can be found in the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, or in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy discovers the “wizard” behind the screen.

Figure 2 illustrates the use of multiple mini-conflicts to maintain reader interest. The mini-conflicts must be resolved before the ultimate prize can be attained.

Note the unfinished conflict (UC) and FC points. UC denotes unfinished conflict resolution where the denouement only partially resolves the main conflict, common in films and books in the 1970s and 80s.

A reader experiences doubt, and ideally, the WOW effect lingers after the book is finished.

FC is a mini final conflict that is introduced after the denouement and then deliberately left unresolved. It is

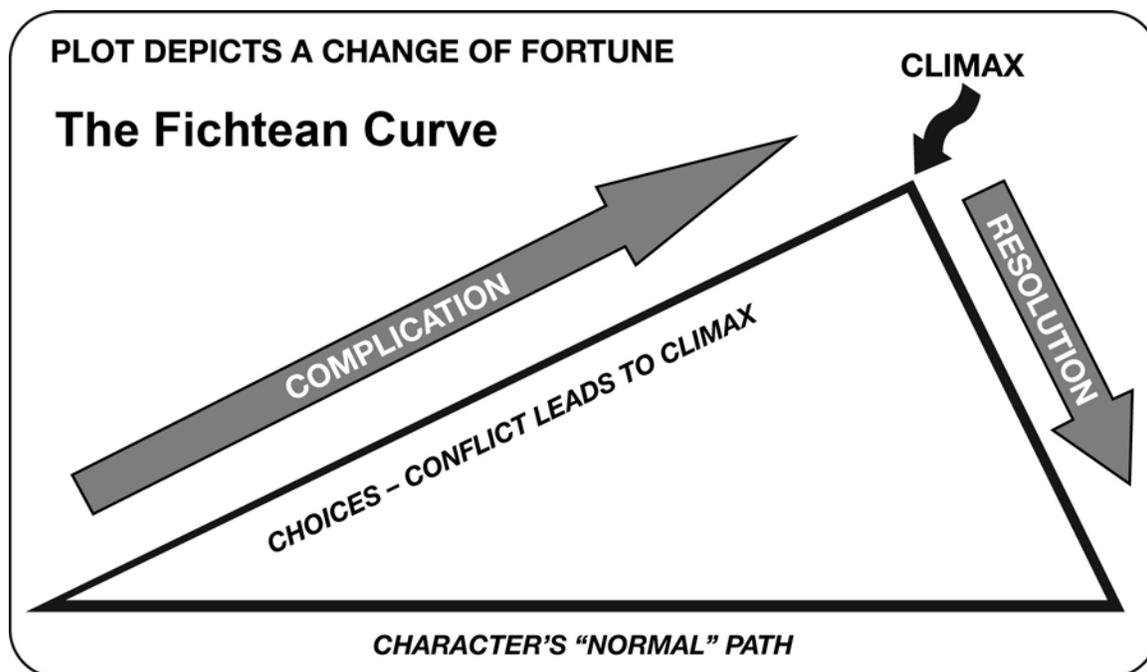


Figure 1: Theoretical Fichtean Curve According to Gardner

Continued on Page 18

## On the edge, *continued from Page 18*

commonly used to establish a premise for a sequel.

Plot must be developed to demonstrate character dimension and significant impact. The vehicle for story development is the Story Arc, comprised of three basic segments known as the Conflict, Crisis and Resolution, or the Beginning, the Middle and the End.

Act 1. A short, opening section leading to the first major event called the Conflict, also known as the Inciting Incident to the Crisis.

Act 2. The meat of the plot. Characters deal with the Crisis.

Act 3. Final movement of the story. Resolution must include a logical conclusion.

Plot archetypes are story patterns that have been codified to include established conventions and plot components. The strongest ones provide a foundation for a story and assume a certain knowledge base on the part of the reader.

### Nine Archetypal Plots:

**Revenge** *Moby Dick*

**Betrayal** *Othello*

**Catastrophe** *The Grapes of Wrath*

**Pursuit** *The Fugitive*

**Rebellion** *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Macbeth*

**The Quest** *Raiders of the Lost Ark, Don Quixote*

**Ambition** *David Copperfield*

**Self-Sacrifice** *Schindler's List*

**Rivalry** *Cyrano de Bergerac*

Pacing fuels a plot's engine. At its best, it drives the scenes upward through rising action, and creates tension and intrigue. It is vital that scenes be interspersed throughout the book to ensure this tension. All the crucial scenes should not all be saved for the end.

To illustrate the synergy between plot and pacing, let's turn to the Master of Suspense, Alfred Hitchcock.

He says, "People think that pace is fast action, quick cutting, people running around, and it is not that at all. I think that pace is made by keeping the mind of the spectator occupied. You don't need to have quick cutting or playing, but you do need a very full story and the changing of situations one to another. So long as you can sustain that

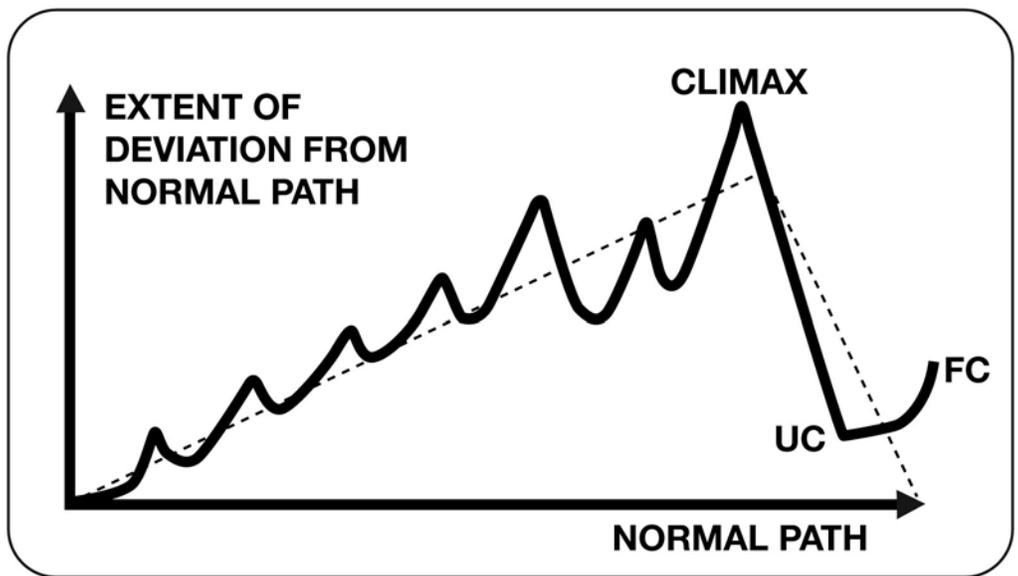


Figure 2: Fichtean Curve for a Typical Novel or Film

and not let up, you have pace.

"That is why suspense is such a valuable thing. All stories, even a love story, can have suspense. It's not just saving someone from the scaffold, it's whether the man will get the girl. Suspense has a lot to do with the audience's own desires — audience identification. Very, very important, because they will care more about a known person.

"So first, I select background, then action and shape them into a plot. Finally, I select a character to motivate the whole of it all."

Hitchcock cites two kinds of suspense:

**Objective:** the typical chase scene shown from all angles, OR

**Subjective:** letting the audience experience through the eyes and/or mind of a chosen character or characters. Let the reader participate in the suspense, raising tension.

In *Rope*, a young man is strangled in the opening shot. His body is placed in a chest covered with a damask cloth and silver service, and hor d'oeuvres and drinks are served from it at a party for the victim's relatives.

This story is not a whodunit. Only the killers know the truth about the body. The readers must watch as the party guests navigate a treacherous scenario. That is suspense.

Whether you use a main plot or a series of mini-conflicts, take your reader on an unexpected path to a WOW moment. Make them feel what your characters feel, and they will care as deeply as you do — about a mystery that matters.

*Claire Applewhite is a graduate of St. Louis University and the author of The Wrong Side of Memphis, Crazy For You, St. Louis Hustle, and Candy Cadillac.*

# What I wish someone had told me

By Hank Phillippi Ryan

They say you can only learn by experience. Fine. But what “they” didn’t say — the experience doesn’t have to be your own! And therein lies a class. At the end of the MWA University day, when students’ heads are full of Jess Lourey’s “one sentence” method of plot development and Hallie Ephron’s “out of whack moment” in the three-act structure, and they know what Reed Farrel Coleman means by “writitor” and they’ve heard Dan Stashower read from Raymond Chandler — it’s my turn. And my class, “What I wish someone had told me” is there to give the students/authors/writers one last burst of energy (and maybe even inspiration) before they head back to their computers.

When you had your brilliant idea for a mystery novel, did you have any idea what you were in for? Looking back now, do you have notebooks full of character sketches that did you no good? (Or do you wish you had written character sketches?) Did you start as an outliner — and then realize it didn’t matter? You’ve certainly learned to expect a bad writing day from time to time. Did you learn to handle it?



Hank Phillippi Ryan

Just as a great character must grow and change during the course of a novel (third class of the day) we as writers must also grow and change. And, we hope, for the better. I wish someone had told me that what seems like a brick wall in the morning often disappears if I stop worrying about it. That the ridiculous derivative clichéd words I write can be edited into potentially not bad. And that a week later, I won’t be able to tell the difference between what I wrote on an “in-the-zone” day and what I wrote on a “whose idea was this, anyway” day. I wish someone had told me how deeply distressing the self-doubt can be. And how reassuring one good line can become.

Another thing that’s especially reassuring: In talking to other writers, I’ve discovered that in this necessarily solitary writing life, there is a community that’s always there. That those other writers are having exactly the same experiences. And those are experiences we can learn from.

Here’s what Tess Gerritsen told me: “With every new project, I wonder if I’ve lost the touch, or whether this next book will disappoint readers and everyone will finally realize that I’m a talentless know-nothing.” Okay,

if successful wonderful brilliant Tess Gerritsen has felt that way? We know it’s okay that we do, too.

Stefanie Pintoff also admits to bad days. And she’s learned how to battle them. “How do I handle a bad writing day? I read a good book by one of my favorite authors. All of us were readers, first, before we became writers. And it’s reading that keeps my love of stories alive ... that reminds me why I write ... that inspires me to keep working.”

Dana Cameron began to understand the steps of her personal journey: “It took me a long while to realize every project, no matter the size or the genre, has a similar progression. I eventually started keeping a work journal, just so I could go back and realize, yes, on every other book a.) I didn’t believe I had a whole book in me, b.) there would be a horrible place in the middle (lasting a few days) where I was tired and had no idea where to take the story next, and c.) my daily writing output would double or triple as I neared the end. Made it easier to realize I’d been through this before.”

Julie Smith’s ‘what I wish’ is also about process — “I wish I’d known what a first chapter’s for — which is to make you love my character and to get her in the middle of something exciting. What it’s not for is to give you her entire back story, complete with favorite foods and playlists and a few interesting insights into the weather patterns of Northern California. Here’s what I tell my students about that: no exposition, no flashbacks, no digressions.”

And Reed Farrel Coleman — after 13 novels — understands the big picture. “That getting published is only the start line and not the finish line. I think a lot of first time authors are shocked at the complexities of the business when their manuscripts are accepted. I wish someone had let me know that it’s a marathon and not a sprint.”

So there you are, at your computer, alone and feeling like no one else has ever faced the enormity and challenge of that blank page. The cursor blinks, taunting, reminding you how many words you have to go, and how far away “THE END” seems.

And yet, and yet—and that’s what my class is all about. Like any good synopsis, this is just to tempt you—and to remind you, we’ve all be there. We’ve all gotten past it. And we will again.

I wish someone had told me this stuff when I started. Now I know there’s a whole lot more. Give back. Be grateful. Celebrate. There’s always more to learn. Each “What I Wish” class is different! Come join us.

*Hank Phillippi Ryan is the investigative reporter for Boston’s NBC affiliate, and has won 28 Emmys for her work. Author of five mystery novels, Ryan has won the Agatha, Anthony and Macavity awards.*

# THE 3rdDegree

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA

Mystery Writers of America Inc.  
1140 Broadway, Suite 1507  
New York, NY 10001

Special Edition: MWA University  
August 2013

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

PRESORTED  
FIRST - CLASS MAIL  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
Merrifield, VA  
PERMIT NO. 6445



## *Some of the topics covered in this special MWA-U issue of TTD:*

### EDITING

"...editing, rewriting, and tweaking are often the things that salvage a manuscript from the slush pile."

Reed Coleman, p. 3-4

### PLANNING

"Writing a novel really is that straightforward when you break it into the seven manageable steps of the writing pyramid."

Jess Lourey, p. 5-6

### DIALOGUE

"Well, just as in the real world, it's hardly ever to exchange information. Or at least not only for that. It's to connect, to cement relationships, to kick back, for comfort, to impress, to seduce, to intimidate, to avoid awkward silences."

Catriona McPherson, p. 15-16

### SETTING

"Used properly, setting is a tool that advances your agenda on every front... helping you to hook your reader in ways that may not be obvious on the surface, but will exert a kind of emotional undertow. If you're doing it right, you will make your readers feel things."

Daniel Stashower p. 7-8

"One of the great sources of tension in fiction, of course, is a character who is of one setting (though perhaps unaware of it) and finds himself uncomfortably in another."

John Galligan, p. 11-12

### EXPERIENCE

"They say you can only learn by experience. Fine. But what 'they' didn't say — the experience doesn't have to be your own!"

Hank Phillippi Ryan, p. 19

### PLOTTING

"...a plot in which this happens, and then this happens, and then this happens, and things just keep on happening but there's no tension building...[is] a plot that's circling the drain instead of heading toward the finish line."

Hallie Ephron, p. 9-10

"Conflict...is at the heart of any storytelling, no matter the genre. Yet, many writers shy away from it. We like our characters too much to make their lives miserable."

Laura DiSilverio, p. 13-14

"Whether you use a main plot or a series of mini-conflicts, take your reader on an unexpected path to a WOW moment. Make them feel what your characters feel, and they will care as deeply as you do..."

Claire Applewhite, p. 17-18