



Information Sheet: Writing Craft

Writing craft is the infrastructure of writing. Like any artform it must be learnt, developed and mastered. Just as a great dancer or musician spends years learning and refining their craft, so do great writers. And they invest in their craft, with time and with money – taking classes, doing courses, and seeking out mentors.

All good writers learn their craft because they know that the more deeply they understand the rules, the more freely they will be able to break them to experiment, take risks, and truly find their voice.

This information sheet includes information about some of the expressions, words and tools you'll hear about as your progress through your writing journey.

The best place to learn writing craft is through reading – reading everything you can, as often as you can, both from within your genre and outside of it.

Plot

Plot is the sequence of events that make up a story. It is the narrative that drives the writing. A plot should maintain tension and action so that the reader is hooked.

There are a number of tropes or stereotypical plots, such as 'rags to riches' or 'the hero's quest', into which most stories fit. To read more about these, try Christopher Booker's book *The Seven Basic Plots*. These well known story structures can be a good place to begin when crafting a plot.

You may have an idea for a story that is currently a sequence of events. That's a good place to start, but the work really lies in taking this series of events and turning them into a plot, where all the story elements have a relationship to each other. This is causality, and this is what makes a great driving plot.

How to Plot

Some authors love to plot their novels completely before they start writing (they're known as 'plotters'). Others sit down, stare at a blank page, and off they go (they're sometimes described as 'pantsers' because they write by the seat of their pants). Whichever one you are, here are some handy tips and techniques to get you writing.



The Three Act Structure

This is your 'go to' plot structure. It's easy to use, hugely popular, tried and tested. Janice Hardy does a great post about it here:

<http://blog.janicehardy.com/2013/10/how-to-plot-with-three-act-structure.html>

The Hero's Journey (aka Monomyth)

Here's another great structure to help you plot your novel. Introduced in 1940 by Joseph Campbell, The Hero's Journey is a reliable narrative formula that's used in a lot of action and fantasy stories. Janice Hardy provides a good description on The Hero's Journey on her blog here:

<http://blog.janicehardy.com/2013/10/plotting-with-heros-journey.html>

Beat Sheets

Beat sheets are a great way to plan all your scenes, predict your word count, track the purpose for each scene, sorting your scenes into chapters, and write down a description for each scene. Jamie Gold does a comprehensive blog about it here:

<https://jamigold.com/2012/02/how-to-use-the-save-the-cat-beat-sheet/>

She also has examples of different beat sheets in her resources for writers:

<https://jamigold.com/for-writers/worksheets-for-writers/>

The Snowflake Method

This method is all about making your novel easier to write. It starts with general statements and ideas, narrowing them down to the nitty gritty details. Read Randy Ingermanson's wildly popular blog post about The Snowflake Method here:

<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/articles/snowflake-method/>

Mind Maps

Put your title, concept, word count or anything else that inspires you in the middle of the page or write it on a whiteboard and work from there. Here's a list of mind mapping apps if you want to get tech savvy.



Scene Cards

Write down all your scenes on different cards, and then plot them out on the ground or a table. You'll be able to see the holes before you come to them and be able to fix them. It's a visual way of plotting. This one can be done online too. Here's a website that will help you out:

<https://www.lifehack.org/articles/featured/11-free-mind-mapping-applications-web-services.html>

Scrivener

If you're a plotter and you haven't yet discovered the writing program Scrivener, your free trial is just a click away. Your scenes will look like Post-it notes on a corkboard. You can organise your scenes into folders, have everything labelled a dozen different ways, write scene descriptions, use research and brainstorming folders—all within the program where you're writing your novel. Basically, it's your organisational safe place. Find it here:

<https://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener/overview>

Of course, a book is not just a plot. The other key elements of your manuscript include characterisation, character motivation, emotion, subplots, foreshadowing to name a few.

Characters

Writing characters is one of the great challenges of both fiction and narrative nonfiction. They need to be three-dimensional with believable flaws, desires and motivations. If you can write strong, believable, empathetic characters, you are well on your way to publication. Story narratives can be driven by action, but are often, particularly in literary fiction and nonfiction, driven by character development and motivations.

The most important element of these is motivation. All great characters have a desire that drives the action. The tension in a story is created through the external and internal barriers to their goals. Readers need tension to stay engaged, and they need real characters to emotionally connect to.

Some writers develop their characters as they write and only grow to understand who they are when the story is finished. If you prefer to plan your characters, here are some worksheets to help develop a character profile:

The basics by Jody Hedlund:

<http://jodyhedlund.blogspot.com/p/character-worksheet.html>

The Marcel Proust Character Questionnaire:

<https://www.writingclasses.com/toolbox/character-questionnaire/proust>



Dialogue

Dialogue is a conversation between two or more characters. It can do a number of things in a manuscript, including:

- Revealing characters' relationships, feelings and thoughts
- Weaving in character motivation and backstory
- Progressing the story and increasing the tension
- Breaking up internalisation and description in the prose

Writing good dialogue can be hard. Authors need to find a distinct voice for each of their characters; they have to make the dialogue seem authentic, and it has to serve other purposes as well. Writing good dialogue also means knowing how to use dialogue tags – such as 'she said' or 'he asked' – to drive the action and emotion.

Here are some useful articles on dialogue:

<https://www.thecreativepenn.com/2014/07/28/writing-dialogue/>
<https://writetodone.com/10-easy-ways-to-improve-your-dialogue/>

Figurative and descriptive language

Some great writing is plain and unadorned. But equally, some great writing can use figurative language to strengthen the messages, themes, power and beauty of a story. Figurative language includes metaphors, similes, hyperbole, juxtaposition and allusion.

Writers are often encouraged to think about how to incorporate all of the senses to effectively evoke a place or event: smell, taste, hearing, touch, sight and intuition (a character's instinct or gut reaction). References to the senses place the reader physically into the story.

Take a look at these examples of figurative language:

<https://blog.udemy.com/figurative-language-list/>

Point of View

First person

"I assessed that I was progressing well at this point, and did not think the apricot reference would be a problem. I was wrong." - *The Rosie Project*, Graeme Simsion

First person is written from the point of view of a character using the pronoun 'I.' This point of view is intimate - a direct connection to what a character is thinking - and allows for a strong character voice.



However, it restricts a story from covering scenes or information not experienced or known by the character. For novice writers, it is easy to overuse interior monologue and repetition of 'I' or 'my.'

Second person

"Some of the honey runs out onto your fingers and you lick it off. It takes you about a minute to eat the bread." - *Happy Endings*, Margaret Atwood

The narrator uses the pronouns 'you,' 'your' and 'yours' to put the reader into the story. It tends to work better for short works. Second person can have an alienating effect and is not commonly used in narrative.

Third person

"She remembered being out in the back garden, as lights from the Cowley car plant spilt across the darkening sky, smoking her last cigarette, thinking there must be more to life." - *Tin Man*, Sarah Winman

These stories are told using 'he,' 'she' and 'it' pronouns and is the most commonly used point of view. It is useful when telling a story from more than one character's point of view.

Third person limited means that the point of view is limited to the knowledge and experience of one character. It operates similar to first person. Alternatively, third person omniscient narrators are God-like in that they know all and can jump into the head of any character. It is generally believed to be the hardest point of view to write. It is easy to find yourself 'head-hopping' and is difficult to write cliffhangers or twists.

Unreliable narrator and credibility gap

An unreliable narrator is one that lies, deceives, or is untrustworthy for one reason or another. The reader is led to understand that the narrator's view of events is highly subjective. This can be revealed towards the end of a story. A credibility gap is the difference between what the narrator says and what the reader knows. This gap is created using the actions of other characters to show the reader the dishonesty or mistakes of the narrator, such as in John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* where the reader knows that on the other side of the fence is a Nazi concentration camp but the child narrator envisions a paradise where inhabitants may wear pyjamas all day.

Setting

Setting is not just the place in which the story takes place. It may also encompass the following:

- Location (country, state, city or town, room)
- Month or season. If your story progresses over a length of time, don't forget to include holidays and other significant dates - as well as changing seasons
- Time of day
- Elapsed time
- Environmental factors, such as weather, temperature, lighting, type of surroundings (woods vs.



tropical rainforest)

- Historical era (World War II, the Regency)
- Socio-economic environment of the characters and the way people around them are treated

Setting adds layers of interest, believability and vibrancy to your story. Some readers are motivated by the desire to explore different places, people and times through the written word.

Voice

Voice is an elusive concept. It is the x-factor of your writing and it is uniquely yours. It encompasses a worldview, vocabulary, the way you string sentences together and the elements of your personality that are revealed in your writing. Just as you talk differently in different situations, your writing also shifts in style and tone across different types of writing – but your voice stays the same.

Publishers will reject a manuscript, article or short story if it doesn't have a distinctive voice because the work will fall flat. Novice writers often struggle to find their voice, and may imitate writers they admire instead of developing their own.

Need help? Check out:

This guide to finding your voice – <http://goinswriter.com/writing-voice/>

Tips to developing your voice – <http://simplewriting.org/writers-voice/>

Writers SA offers a comprehensive range of workshops throughout the year on all these aspects of craft. You can check out our program on our website, or get in touch at info@writerssa.org.au or on 8223 7662.