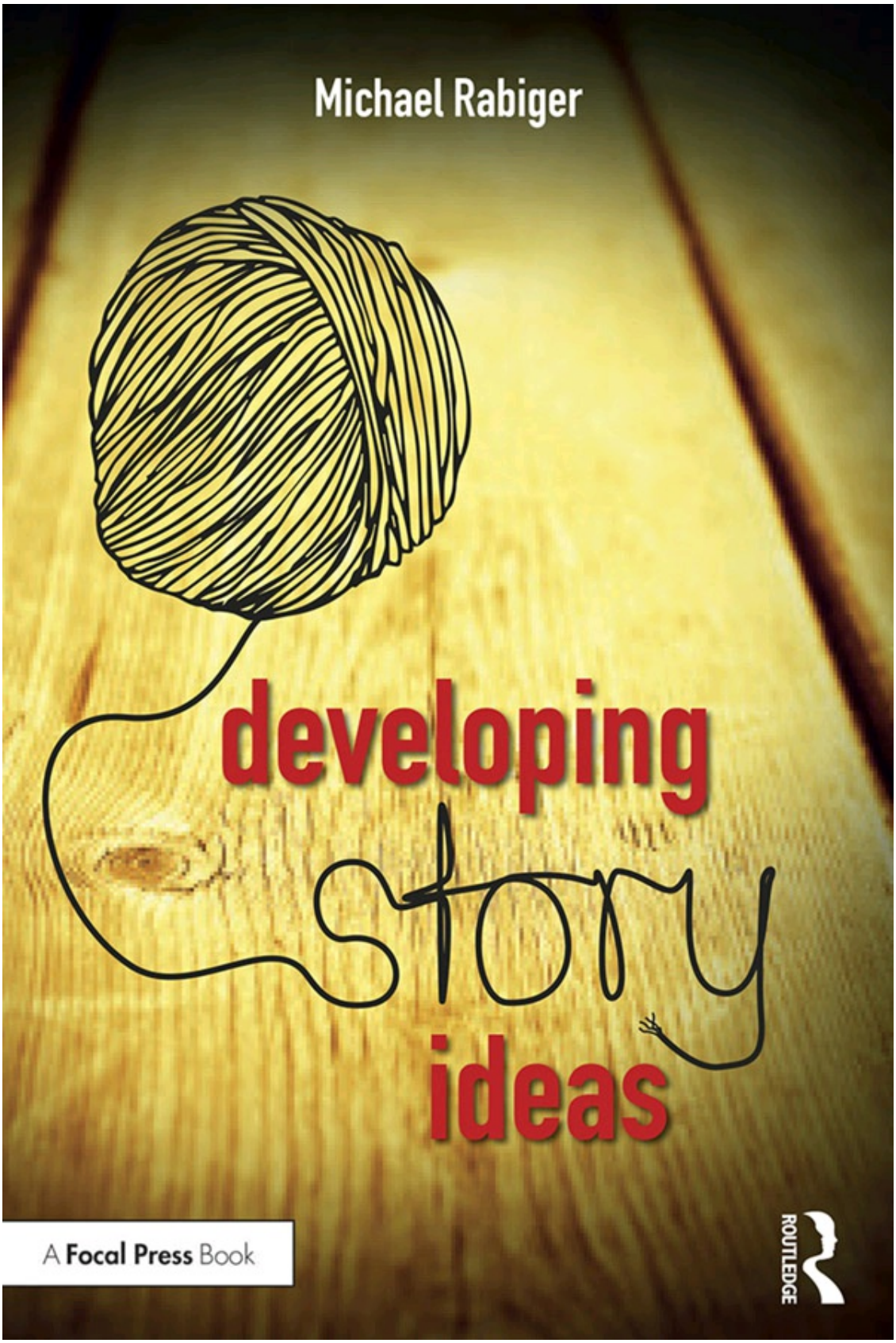
Michael Rabiger

developing story ideas

A Focal Press Book

ROUTLEDGE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Developing Story Ideas

The vast majority of screenplay and writing books that focus on story development have little to say about the initial concept that inspired the piece. *Developing Story Ideas: The Power and Purpose of Storytelling, Third Edition* provides writers with ideational tools and resources to generate a wide variety of stories in a broad range of forms. Celebrated filmmaker and author Michael Rabiger demonstrates how to observe situations and themes in the writer's own life experience, and use these as the basis for original storytelling.

This new edition has been updated with chapters on dramatic analysis, adaptation, improvisation, and cast collaboration's roles in story construction, as well as a companion website featuring further projects, class assignments, instructor resources, and more.

- Gain the practical tools and resources you need to spark your creativity and generate a wide variety of stories in a broad range of forms, including screenplays, documentaries, novels, short stories, and plays
- Through hands-on, step-by-step exercises and group and individual assignments, learn to use situations and themes from your own life experience, dreams, myth, and the news as the basis for character-driven storytelling; harness methods of screenplay format, dialogue, plot structure, and character development that will allow your stories to reach their fullest potential

Michael Rabiger began in the cutting rooms of England's Pinewood and Shepperton Studios, became an editor and BBC director of documentaries, and then specialized for many years in the US as a production and aesthetics educator. At Columbia College Chicago he was co-founder, then chair of the Film/Video Department, and established the Michael Rabiger Center for Documentary. He has directed or edited more than 35 films, given workshops in many countries, and led a multinational European workshop for CILECT. Additionally, he won the International Documentary Association's Scholarship and Preservation Award, served as a Fulbright Specialist in South Africa, and became an honorary professor at the University of Buenos Aires. He is the author of *Directing the Documentary*, and the co-author of

Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics, both published by Focal Press and available in multiple languages.

Developing Story Ideas

The Power and Purpose of Storytelling

Third Edition

Michael Rabiger

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To my wife Nancy Mattei, with heartfelt thanks and admiration for our four decades of marriage, family life, and creative partnership.

Contents

Introduction

"Nothing is real until I have written about it."[1]

Writing is a matchless way to discover and express the currents in your life. This book will show you that you have a unique creative identity and a stock of your own moving stories to tell. Its guidance should be liberating and exhilarating, and you won't have to face characters that refuse to come alive, plots that fizzle, or story ideas that seem derivative.

Use this book solo as a self-help guide, as a classroom text, or as the inspirational core in an informal writers' group. Its discussions and workout assignments will show you where to find the ideas you haven't yet had. Along the way, you will become familiar with what a working writer feels, thinks, and does.

This Book's Goals

All stories need a solid groundwork in *ideation*—that is, in strong core ideas. These, if they are to move people, must be rooted in the author's personal, emotional experience. To this end, *Developing Story Ideas* takes the reader on a six-part writer's journey:

- Part I: **Overview**: Introducing the book's goals, approaching the creative process, and overcoming common impediments.
- Part II: **The Roots of Invention**: Assignments in observation, improvisation, and self-examination that help you discover the marks you carry and make a preliminary profile of your creative identity.
- Part III: **Craft and Concepts of Drama**: Introducing a range of concepts to help you develop strong characters, analyze how a scene is or isn't working, assess a complete work for its outcome, and test a story idea and its prevailing point of view. How dramatic form works, how to strengthen weak story elements, and how to give and take constructive critical feedback.
- Part IV: **Writing Assignments**: Using a graduated range of writer's resources, their subjects focus on autobiography, family tradition, dreams, myth, legend, news media, short story, and film

assignments. Early projects focus on short works applicable to prose fiction, theatre, or journalism, while later ones encompass a full-length documentary subject and two pieces of original fiction. The short fiction assignment asks for a single point of view, the long-form feature film idea asks for two viewpoints. With each assignment is one or more student samples with a critical assessment for you to compare with your own impressions and criticism.

Part V: **Creating Collaboratively**: Some of the most interesting contemporary film and theatre work comes from collaborative relationships. Two important experiments let you try their techniques for yourself.

Part VI: **Developing as a Writer**: Revisiting your artistic identity with your body of work in hand and consolidating your sense of artistic preferences and direction. Techniques of advanced story-editing for you to use on your favorite outlines before regarding them as complete. The basics needed to begin turning any thoroughly tested idea outline into a screenplay, documentary proposal, stage play, or prose fiction or nonfiction piece.

The origins of the book's methods: My assumptions about human creativity and learning arise from two kinds of experience. One came from professional immersion in film—first as a film editor in feature films, then as a documentary director, mostly for the BBC. The other kind of experience, equally fascinating, came from three decades of international teaching. From this I learned not only how people absorb and master an art form but also that they can learn in months what takes literally years when you have to learn on the job, as I did.

Assignments: Most people learn fastest and most enjoyably from making things, so there is a choice among fifty hands-on assignments. The observations you make from life lead to an improvisation game, one that stretches your intuition and strengthens your confidence. There are childhood- and family-based writing assignments, others drawing on oral or traditional story sources, and others still that involve memories and dreams.

Improvisational games guide you into working intuitively with observation, imagery, memory, and other resources, and from this come story projects in brief outline form. This compact form makes group reading and discussion easy and allows the writer to make radical changes easily too.

You will produce short fiction and reality-based stories, and the final assignments (in fiction and documentary film) guide you toward controlling point of view in your work. Subsequently you can develop any of your story outlines into literary prose, screenplays, theatre plays, radio scripts, and perhaps even stand-up comedy. Each narrative art, of course, has its own particular requirements, which are touched upon at the end.

New in this edition: The book has received a root and branch overhaul, as well as some structural improvements. Part II: The Roots of Invention, in which I deal with understanding and defining one's artistic identity, has been greatly expanded. It is a key concept in my whole approach to creativity, and one much appreciated by the book's users. Part III, focusing on the craft and concepts of drama, now includes a more comprehensive "toolkit" to help you assess any part of any story in any medium. Included are methods to:

- Handle the roles of author, story-editor, presenter, audience member, or critic
- Develop characters
- Understand stereotypes and archetypes, as well as "flat" and "round" characters
- Identify the components of a scene, and assess and graph them as a dramatic arc
- Divide a work into the three-act structure
- Analyze any form of story for its effectiveness, meaning, and purpose
- Handle point of view in storytelling

Chapter 22, Catalyzing Drama, is a new chapter on collaborative research and authorship methods. These lie behind "devised theatre," and the distinguished cinema of Robert Altman, Ingmar Bergman, John Cassavetes, Mike Leigh, and Rick Linklater, among others. Two assignments offer fascinating collaborative experiments applicable to literary nonfiction as well as film.

Thanks: Many good people have contributed to this book's evolution. My

thanks go to Cindy Keeling and Penny Weeden for their opinions on new sections, and to the faculty and students of Columbia College Chicago for three decades of incomparable dialogue. I also wish to thank Ruth Muller for the photo of her mother, Margaret Powell Lesser.

I am indebted to the film department faculty at New York University for their discussions and friendship, in particular Lora Hays, George Stoney, and Marketa Kimbrell, who sadly are no longer with us. Thanks also to Ken Dancyger, Nick Tanis, and Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, who kindly invited me to NYU as a visiting teacher.

I owe particular gratitude to my NYU students who generously permitted me to reproduce their writing. They came from France, Korea, Norway, Mexico, Britain, Canada, and of course the USA. Thank you, Michelle Arnove, Bryan Beasley, Leah Cho, Chris Darnley, Paul Flanagan, Angela Galean, Michael Hanttula, Margaret Harris, Kundong Lee, Louis Leterrier, Amanda McCormick, Alex Meilleur, Cynthia Merwath, Tatsuyo Ohno, Joy Park, Peter Riley, Trish Rosen, Vilka Tzouras, Sharmaine Webb, and Julie Werenskiold. Their hard work and infectious enthusiasm made our classes a joy, and there would literally be no book without them.

Michael Rabiger
Chicago, 2016

Note

1 Quotation from Lois Deacon, author of *Providence and Mr. Hardy* (Hutchinson, 1966), remembered from a conversation.

Part I
Overview

1 Goals and Getting Started

Behind this book's approach lie two key beliefs. One, that everyone has a writer inside trying to get out; the other, that creativity means first visualizing what you mean to create, then constructing the bridge necessary to get there. This book focuses on the visualizing, conceptual, or *ideation* stage of storytelling, a foundational stage largely ignored by most writing manuals, which deal mainly with achieving a professional finish. Such inattention to fundamentals leaves the novice like an architect struggling to correct faulty steelwork after the building has gone up.

This book shows you how to tap into your own body of experience, how to present an initial story idea to an audience or readership, and how to make use of their critique as you go on to develop your story. It also provides a revised, expanded set of story analysis tools to help you edit and restructure with confidence and enjoyment.

Because we deal in story fundamentals, this book asks that you write in brief outline form. Long-form work would overload writer and reader alike, and obscure what we seek to understand and develop.

You can wade into the graduated writing assignments in Chapters 13–21 as soon as you like. Write solo in your own way and at your own pace, or use this book in an ad hoc writer's group or a creative writing class. If you are the group leader or teacher, the book's website (www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger) will help you plan a syllabus and discuss how best to handle your leadership role.

Sidebars like this contain pertinent advice, instructions, or definitions. Key words are italicized in both the sidebar and the accompanying text. Use the Index to locate whatever else you need.

Because I believe fervently in learning by doing, the assignments embody:

- Self-assessment exercises to help you find your artistic identity
- Ways to prime the creative process so you can eliminate writer's block
- Enjoyable ways to value and make use of your formative experience

- Ways to use personal and communal resources that writers draw on
- Creative games and graphics
- Short, challenging writing assignments to develop essence, structure, and meaning
- Writing in brief outline form ready for a variety of outcomes (fiction, nonfiction, journalism, film, television, or theatre)
- Ways to give and take constructive critique
- Dramaturgical tools and terminology, often in easy-to-see sidebars
- Ways to work with others instead of compete with them
- Writing samples and accompanying critique to demonstrate creative criticism in action
- Encouragement to expand your favorite outlines into short story, novel, play, or cinema screenplay form

If you are part of a class or writers' group, your teacher/leader will adapt the work to their own experience and preferences. In most writing communities, practice and critique take place in an atmosphere of shared enthusiasm and friendship, so expect much valuable experience from interacting with your peers.

Playing Roles

Creating stories is intriguing because an author plays different roles, wears different hats, and strikes differing balances between spontaneity and intellect:

Author. This is the instinctive, intuitive, anarchic persona generating the raw material. In this mode, write down whatever you see, hear, or imagine without a second thought. Allow no limitations or procedures to interfere with your output—simply concentrate on setting down whatever your imagination produces.

Presenter. Whether you *pitch* (orally present) a story idea to one person or twenty, you now assume an actor/showman role. Using active-voice, colorful language, take only a few minutes to outline the fundamentals of your plot and characters. From your audience's body language and facial expressions you will know which parts do

or don't connect. By the end, you will sense where you need to make changes. Stand-up comedians do this nightly.

When you *pitch* a story, you make a 3–5 minute oral presentation so the listener can envisage the characters, events, and purpose of your intended tale. People make pitches wherever judges must decide whose project merits support.

Audience. Reactions by an audience to nascent ideas are a vital reality check, so your reactions are vital to anyone else's idea or story. Listen and watch, closely and respectfully. Later you will articulate whatever feelings, thoughts, and reactions the presentation provoked.

Critic. Offering constructive feedback means communicating a work's effect back to its creator. List what you found effective, particularly what sprang alive in your mind's eye. Respectfully suggest what you think might benefit from change or development. Good critics work from feelings and impressions and avoid intellectualizing. They address what they think the storyteller is trying to accomplish, and avoid talk of how they would handle the story themselves.

All creative artists switch between roles, and playing only one at a time takes practice, self-control, and vigilance. When you are writing in Author mode, the Critic persona will try to break into your consciousness to belittle your efforts. When you are a Presenter receiving critical comments, the Author and Critic want to stand up and howl in your defense instead of listening. This would block you from absorbing valuable audience reactions. However, with practice and self-awareness you can learn to stay in the appropriate role and switch cleanly between them, leaving you with a real sense of achievement.

You and Your Resources: Novice writers often humbly assume that nothing has happened to them worth writing about, and so they emulate the ideas and styles of favorite writers. But this is working from the outside inward and leads to paralysis.

You think you have nothing yet to write about? I disagree. Directly or

indirectly, you have experienced victory, defeat, love, hate, being thrown out of Eden, death—everything. Thus, what you lack is not dramatic experience, but knowing how to recognize, value, and shape it.

A key lies in what Herman Melville called "the shock of recognition," those moments of piercing clarity when a special truth or meaning has risen up to hit you between the eyes. This book shows where to look for these and what to do with them when you find them.

Other people are an important part of your resources. Classmates or other writers in a writers' group are part of your support system, and you are part of theirs. It is important to get collective as well as individual responses to your work.

With collaboration in mind, the first assignment concerns role-playing and is an excellent icebreaker. One or two rounds of this assignment at each meeting will let each class member's individuality emerge. Although described in a class setting, it can take place in practically any gathering or group.

Assignment 1–1: Who Am I?

A class member becomes the focus of the class's attention as he or she impersonates someone especially important (the "model") whose identity remains undisclosed.

Step 1: When your turn comes, carry an object associated with your model, or wear an article reminiscent of his or her favorite clothing, and sit in front of the class ready to answer questions.

Step 2: For perhaps ten minutes your audience poses probing questions to find out about you. Staying in character, you respond to their questions from your sense of your model's history and in his or her mood and manner. The object is twofold:

- That you "become" your model and answer truthfully and in character wherever the questioning leads.
- That the audience finds out all they can and develops

ideas about the model's significance and relationship to you, the actor who reincarnates the model.

Step 3: After ten to twenty minutes of interaction, the class leader calls "Cut," and the interviewee now listens to a discussion in which the audience:

- Collectively reviews their impressions,
- Guesses at the kind of person portrayed, and
- Decides the likely relationship between actor and model.

This exercise is excellent for group bonding, and can reveal unexpected depths in participants, no matter how inexperienced. One performance in a workshop I gave in Norway was electrifying: Svein, a man of around thirty, played a quiet, reticent woman whose life contained a traumatic secret. When "she" referred to "my son" we guessed he was playing his late mother, and the room seemed to fill with the gravity and sadness of her ghostly presence. Obliquely, his mother's life-tragedy emerged: during Norway's occupation in World War II, when Svein's mother was a young single woman, she had fallen in love with a German officer. He was killed or otherwise lost to her, and afterward she was cruelly shunned as a collaborator. The experience left her scarred and stigmatized, and (as I privately guessed) her son too.

Few "Who Am I" exercises reach this haunting degree of authenticity, but most are intense and keep the class rapt. Usually a class can handle only one or two performances per meeting.

Ideation and Originality

Most writers agree that the single prerequisite to becoming a writer is to keep writing, no matter what. Talent is a myth in which few working writers believe. They will tell you that most ideas are initially banal and similar, and that one has to work incrementally and patiently toward originality. It's not about going where no man hath trod, but rather about working tenaciously at realizing all aspects of an idea's potential. Because so little is evident at the outset, many beginners hurry forward to write their "finished" version, thinking that problems will vanish during completion. They do vanish—but

only from sight.

> *Ideation* should include finding and developing all the events and ideas that underpin a creative endeavor. Like a building's foundation, a good story idea must be singularly appropriate for what it must support.

To test how far any idea has evolved, pitch it to anyone who'll listen. From the teller-and-audience experience, you will sense the next round of necessary improvements. Keep pushing: tenacity never goes unrewarded.

Writing in Outline Form

Nearly everything you write for this book's assignments will be in scene-outline form, which is good for everyone. By concentrating on action and plot details, and leaving dialogue and mood-setting elements for a later stage, ideas stay compact, quick to read, and easy to modify. Outlines also make a great foundation for developing pitches.

As you learn ever more about the potential of your story idea, an outline is easily changed, and your improvements show up quickly and clearly. When several audiences find the whole of your outline uniformly promising and persuasive, you can turn to expanding it into a short story, novel, play, film—whatever narrative form you have in mind.

Identifying with the Main Character

Many beginners identify wholly with their protagonist, who just happens to share their age, gender, background, and outlook. This is dangerous because the writer is enclosed by the thoughts, feelings, and outlook of their protagonist and lacks critical distance. Inevitably, audiences see flaws in their work that the author cannot, and the author may take criticism as a personal attack.

How, then, to create a range of believable characters, people unlike yourself, when in life we never wholly enter another person's reality? Whether you are a friend, relative, or bystander, you often sense other people's interior feelings and motivations. To paraphrase the acting teacher Constantin Stanislavski, "There is no interior human state without its exterior manifestation."[2] The actor's job, and the writer's too, is to discover those

particular actions that open windows on a person's heart and mind. Your job is to provide what encourages us to *interpret* what your characters feel and want, and to make us intuit their thoughts and motives. By creating characters we see more through their actions than their words, you endow them with truly revealing circumstances and behavior. Actions, they say, speak louder than words.

Jump-Starting the Imagination

Imagination, like an old car, does not work well from a cold start. It prefers jump-starting from examples and associations. This book's practical assignments will show how naturally writing flows when you work from life or play improvisational games. Through completing assignments you will confirm the nature of your artistic self through pursuing the artistic process—that is, making art as you alone can make it. For this, paradoxically enough, you will need help from your peers. An important part of writing—one many writers delay—is showing it to others for their reactions. The secretive writer is the fearful writer who won't show work until it is "finished." This delays the imagined pain of criticism, but also defers the object and gratification of all artistic endeavors—acting upon your audience and considering all the ways they react.

Concerning the Writing Samples and Critiques in Chapters 13–21

While you read and absorb the first dozen chapters, be ready to jump straight into the early writing assignments in Chapters 13–15. Each asks that you develop an idea for a story in outline, one ready for discussion. You should find their methods uncomplicated and their demands straightforward. Further development would take place at a later date, after you choose whether to expand your idea into literary fiction or nonfiction, film, theatre, or broadcast media. Good story cores work in multiple platforms.

Accompanying the assignments are student samples from a New York University film school class. These not only allow me to discuss the ideas and principles covered in Chapters 1–12, but in the context of actual student writing. Should you need alternative approaches or further information, many

chapters have alternative assignments and/or a select bibliography appended under the rubric, "Going Further."

Enjoying Your Audience's Reactions

Using today's resources, you can e-mail outlines to interested friends around the globe and get feedback almost immediately. When your critics apply the tools of dramatic analysis to your work, and you apply them to theirs, you get important practice at discerning the balance and interaction of story elements. This helps to reveal each tale's optimal identity, effectiveness, balance, and meaning. If you are lucky enough to be part of a writers' group or class, the mood while doing this work is usually one of excited enjoyment. What can be more convivial than making discoveries together?

An Important Reminder

Whenever you write, *try to create freely and analyze later.* During composition, use any and every writing method that lets you play freely. Grant yourself freedom to generate material and ideas any way possible, for your mind won't work freely if you let it be a censor. Wear but one hat at a time; don't let your growing critical knowledge trample your instincts and personal voice. You can sit, stand, lie down, or float in the bath; you can write at the computer, scribble in an exercise book, talk into a recorder, or mumble to your granny. Revel in the chaos that the improvising author produces. Afterward, move into editorial mode, organize and refine what you have produced.

Do read ahead to see where the work is leading. A book has to present things in linear form, but learning and creating is circular, with many repeats and returns.

Starting Your Resource Collections

Each chapter brings new work, so make an early start at collecting writers' resources:

Picture File: Save any imagery that strongly appeals to you from the Internet, magazines, or newspapers. A powerful inspiration can come from a war photograph, a human interest portrait, a silly fashion ad, or a fabulous landscape.

Dream Journal: This, used for the Dream Sequence project, is private and something you keep at home. Place a notebook and pen by your bed and write down your dreams as they occur. By the way, when you wake up and recall a dream, lie very still until you have retrieved all you can. Often you start with just a remembered fragment, but from quietly contemplating it, more will return, and more still until you have a complete record, which you write in your journal. Before you go to sleep, you can train yourself to wake up and record a good dream by telling yourself, "If I have a good dream, I'll wake up and write it down." Keep up the self-instruction nightly until you awake spontaneously.

News File: Save good news stories in a folder for use in the News Story and Documentary projects. For projects that do not depend on being current, go through old magazines and papers, because there you'll find old material that no one else will think of using. A fantastic source of free newspapers and magazines is a recycling center. Most fiction ideas start from actuality, and old actuality is as good as new.

Writer's Journal: Keep a small notebook with you at all times to record the thoughts, sights, or ideas that spontaneously appear in daily life. Recording the actual is your apprenticeship in observing life more closely and astutely.

Making records and squirreling away whatever attracts your notice is a quintessential writer's habit. If you are using this book in a class, your instructor may ask to see your Writer's Journal at set times during the course. In the future, time spent traveling, waiting around, eating, or even sleeping (if you dream) can always be turned to good account.

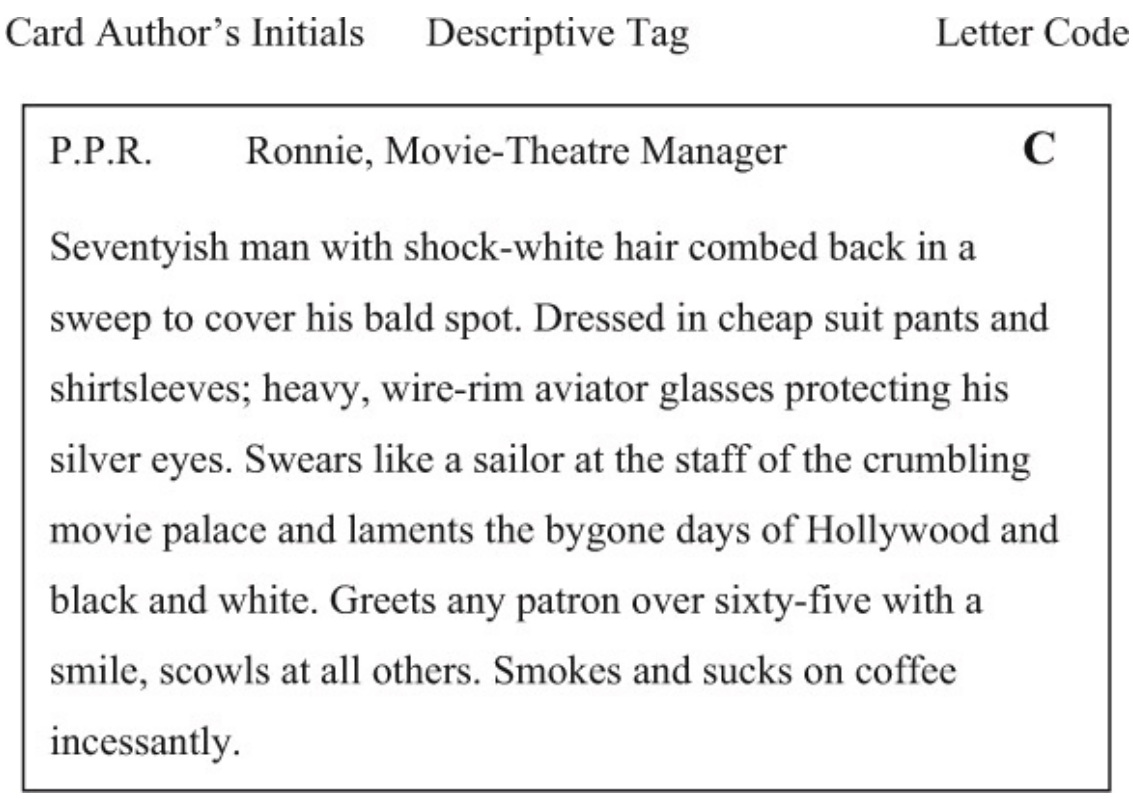


Figure 1–1 A typical CLOSAT card, this one for a character.

Preparing for the Game Called CLOSAT

Your journal notes are your bank of ideas, and the best will become playing cards for a fabulous instant story-making game in Chapter 5 called "CLOSAT." To play it, mount your best observations on index cards as in Figure 1–1. Ronnie is a character, so he's coded C. To make items in your journal accessible by type, tag each with these CLOSAT categories:

C = description of *Characters* who could be used in a story.
L = interesting and visual *Location*.
O = curious or evocative *Object*.
S = loaded or revealing *Situation*.
A = unusual or revealing *Act*.
T = any *Theme* that intrigues you, or that you see embodied in life.

Definitions and Examples

C (*character*) is anyone whose appearance, mannerisms, occupation, or activities suggest potential for a character in a story. You might see somebody momentarily in the street and discover that their image persists afterward, or

you might sit down to distill all you know about an acquaintance of many years. The characters you "collect" become your repertory cast, whose potential depends on the resonances you uncover as you start working with them. You may decide they are major protagonists or only bit-part players. Some people will be unlike anyone you have ever seen before, but many will be types. You know a type-description is good when it summons a smile of delighted recognition from listeners. The examples here are brief *thumbnail* descriptions.

Character Examples:

- Ruddy-faced factory maintenance man with a little pug dog as his companion.
- Rapt little black girl with tongue out as she reads.
- Man and woman biker couple with identical gray ponytails.
- Woman whose yellow running outfit makes her look like a pantomime chicken.

L (*location*) is any place that makes a rich setting for something to happen. Often characters and places go together, but it can be interesting to shake things up and make your runaway urban teenager hide from the law in a smelly chicken farm, or pressure your wan bank clerk into proving himself on a doomed Russian trawler.

Location Examples:

- Harbor bridge with a single street lamp.
- Run-down stationery store.
- Attic room with a grubby, unmade bed.
- Country garage with yellowing pinups next to a rack of fan belts.

O (*object*) is any that is eloquent of place, time, situation, or owners.

Object Examples:

- Pottery pig for storing cookies.
- Battered straw hat with red, white, and blue ribbon.
- Valentine card that plays a squeaky tune.
- Set of partially melted plastic soldiers.
- Woman's makeup kit left on a park bench.

- Pair of running shoes dangling by their laces from a dead tree branch.

S (*situation*) is a conjunction of circumstances or a predicament that puts its characters under some special pressure.

Situation Examples:

- Being the poor guest of a wealthy family.
- Car breaking down at night in a scary neighborhood.
- Being X-rayed wearing a paper gown that gapes open at the back.
- Finding that one's neighbor in a packed cinema is an indigent person with an overpowering smell.
- A neighbor digging what looks like a human-sized grave in his yard.

A (*act*) is any human deed or action that seems freighted with meaning or potential.

Examples of Acts:

- Narrowly avoiding a driving accident and texting your way into the next world.
- Setting up an elaborate practical joke, then relenting.
- Running fully clothed into the sea.
- Avoiding a friend.
- Chopping firewood.
- Improvising a bed for the night.
- Drawing a lot of money from a cash machine.
- Maintaining a smile while being threatened.

T (*theme*) is the central or dominating idea, seldom stated directly, that underlies the subject of a story and that comments on it. If the subject of a story is a homeless teenager, its theme might be "the importance of kindness to strangers."

Examples of Themes:

- Breaking boundaries.
- Revenge.
- Love conquers all.

- Jealousy.
- Betrayal.
- Sibling rivalry.
- Guilt.
- Atonement.
- Forgiveness.

Note

1 Sonia Moore, *The Stanislavski System* (New York: Viking Press, 1965).

2 About the Creative Process

The Journey of the Self

Discovering the stories you are best qualified to tell means looking into unfamiliar aspects of your own life, and grasping the nature of things you may have felt deeply but whose primacy you may not have unrecognized. Such a source came as a true "moment of vision" in my own life. Working on a capsule autobiography for a degree program, I wrote that, "The twenty or so documentary films I have directed are all different, and have nothing in common." No sooner had I put the words on paper than I realized with a premonitory shock that exactly the opposite was true. All my documentaries explored one theme—that of imprisonment and the will to break out of it. True, they had a wide range of subject matter and outcomes, but present in them all was the same underlying concern.

How could this be? As my mind raced to grasp this, the answer arose just as mysteriously. I saw how I had been marked out—first as the sole middle-class boy in a hostile English village, then as the child of a foreigner. Always I had felt like the odd man out—in schools, in my family, in an England besieged and at war, as a conscript in the military, as self-educated among Oxbridge grads in the BBC. Feeling different, however, was such a constant that I had failed to consciously register it. How logical, then, to make a string of films later about captivity and breaking out!

Looking at the many students whose works I had helped midwife into being, I saw that each had moved toward taking possession of some core truth. I saw that only slowly and imperfectly do we grasp what drives us. Yet something within us knows all along, leaving the outer person to cajole and commune with the inner person in search of the inner, motivating truths.

I realized that to speed one's progress as an artist, one must find what *marks* one's life has left. Working in an art form will always further this search, for as we dare to go closer to the core of our being we get better at our craft, and as we improve our craft, we go closer to our personal truths. The two are symbiotic.

Wanting to Tell Stories

Thus we need to tell stories, to hold people's attention by entertaining them. Any comedian will tell you that we do it best by exploring our own inner tensions. As a result, we see better where we are, and why. Truth liberates, and pursuing it connects us with other souls treading the same highway. Think of Dorothy hitching up with her three friends on the Yellow Brick Road. The tale is about finding oneself alone and getting up the courage to join others along the road of life until you become fully, courageously, exultantly alive. L. Frank Baum (1856–1919) expressed this and much else through his children's book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which, translated into its classic 1939 cinema form, has entertained untold millions of young people.

Self-Exposure and Giving Support

To act on the self-discovery material in this book means showing who you are to the people around you and trusting that they will help you along your own, personal Yellow Brick Road. If this makes you nervous, do not worry: you are always in control of what you let show. Consider, however, that to become an artist means you cannot stay in hiding long-term. Conflict and insecurity are as normal as breathing, and artists explore the territory they have been given in order to comprehend it. By taking risks, you will become a natural leader in any story development group. Your example will challenge even the shyest to push their boundaries.

The corollary is that whoever takes risks by showing him- or herself, let them know you appreciate their courage. Good collaborators have generous souls.

What Is Therapy and What Is Art?

People sometimes assume that art and therapy are the same. But therapy exists to reduce pain to manageable proportions and restore a person's appetite for living. Art is freer and outward looking. If your emotional conflicts are particularly present and pressing, you may have to put art-making aside and seek the help of a compassionate professional. You need not and cannot make art if you are drowning.

That said, many who write well do so from a deep impulse for salvation and change. I once interviewed the Italian writer Primo Levi, who worked as an industrial chemist in Italy most of his life. His *Survival in Auschwitz* (title in England, *If This Is a Man*) is acknowledged to be the most restrained, graphic, and profound account of life amid the surreal cruelty of the Nazi death camps. He told me that many prisoners had the same premonitory dream—that you had somehow escaped, got home, and had begun telling a loved one about what had happened to you. Then, as you spoke, the listener got up and left, which was devastating.

Levi got home and had this experience first with his parents, and later in life with his children. None who loved him could bear to hear what he had suffered. Soon after getting home he sat down in his mother's house and wrote for six weeks without stopping. He then put his account away in a drawer for a decade without reading it. "This put a diaphragm between me and the experience," he said. Later, when the manuscript saw the light of day, it became the classic account, the masterpiece about human endurance and survival that nobody ever forgets.

People have to make art to grapple with the mystery of human existence and to share with others the enigmatic patterns, meanings, and mysteries of *what is*. Art sets out to frame questions, sometimes to explain or celebrate. Mostly it pursues what we feel most deeply, what we yearn for and cannot explain. Making it and touching others has to be rooted in your deepest preoccupations, which are usually hidden from you.

What Stories Mean

When you make stories, your work cannot stop at showing what is typical and plain for all to see. That, after all, is the job of a mirror. Somehow you must find what you alone perhaps can make visible. "A work of art," said Victor Hugo, "is a corner of nature seen through a temperament."[1] By articulating what you alone can see through the lens of your own vivid and particular intelligence, you can aspire to give us the sights, sounds, and questions in a world wholly your own, but one joined to ours by our common humanity. You will get there by refusing all that is facile, common, and

ordinary. This means improving what you make, draft by draft, until you have perfected to the best of your ability all that was imperfect.

Whether you aim for fiction or nonfiction, you will need provocative ideas. In making documentary films as I once did, you follow a typical craft cycle that begins with the same research that fiction writers undertake. Documentary is a branch of drama—one that happens to draw on a ready-made world rather than one invented. Gaining entry to your chosen world, you meet particular people living actual situations. As their trust in you grows, they let you into their lives, and clues come to you about what "the real story" may be. Clues lead to discoveries, discoveries lead to hypothetical breakthroughs, and then breakthroughs reward you with ideas and insights on a larger scale. A project that began as a miner's strike story emerges as one about ruthless top-down power by government.

Your piece keeps growing and changing. You are trying to impose greater clarity, draw better causes-and-effects, find greater dramatic inevitability. Like any form of storytelling, you aspire to make your audience experience strong feelings, and through those to illuminate a corner of human life. Again and again, your discoveries depend on an instinctively concurring note in yourself, a capacity to recognize what is deeply true. This often comes from empathically seeing into another person, from seeing their dilemmas as if they were your own. By trying, you almost *become* that person, and it can be as intense as falling in love.

As you end one story, another begins, emerging naturally out of questions left unanswered by the old. The larger the questions, the greater their depth of meaning. Why else would people still want to see the works of the Elizabethan glovemaker's son Will Shakespeare?

Theme and Variation

Artists with a body of successful and expressive work quite often have only one or two deeply felt themes in all their work. This doesn't leave them limited, for a strong theme, like a powerful melody, liberates a writer to explore a whole universe of variations. In Bach's amazing *Musical Offering*, the simple melody suggested by his royal employer progresses by stages into a

whole musical cosmos. The piece ends with a six-part fugue, so that listening to the whole is like being present at the birth of music itself. At YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYouXtuk0T8) you can hear it and see an ingenious visual representation of Bach's intertwining melodic lines.

Just Do It

Genius is not conferred at birth and waiting to be liberated. Rather, it comes from working hard at something that deserves your love. The London artist and teacher Peter Baer believed that anyone could become a decent painter by simply working at painting for twenty years. Writers all say something similar. The "just do it" approach always brings rewards, no matter what kind of work you do. It's a stubborn way of insisting that the whole world is already inside you.

Outline and Expansion

The work in this book takes you high and fast over a lot of terrain. It never asks you to polish or rework a piece. That comes when you decide to move beyond the ideation stage and expand your work into a finished artifact. That process lies largely beyond the scope of this book, but the last chapters prepare you to do this. Bear in mind that a work's final form also takes many, many incarnations. Writing is really all about rewriting.

Collaboration

Particularly when story-making is collaborative, you will sometimes have to stand your ground tenaciously, or risk seeing your prerogatives plucked away by strong-willed colleagues. At important moments, be ready to hold on quietly to your ideas and principles. Before you make any important changes, always try to take time to consider what your critics have said. They may maul you, but they will have to respect you.

> *Collaborating* with other people is a wonderfully social and energizing way to make something. The cinema owes its ascendency to being made by artistic collectives.

Note

1 Émile Zola, *Mes Haines* (1866 essay by the French novelist writing in the literary school of naturalism).

Part II

The Roots of Invention

Tales that entertain, disturb, or thrill us come not only from authors but *through* them. Because writers are artists creating a "corner of Nature seen through a temperament," they work long and hard to recognize and develop what is particular to their way of seeing.

Preparing for this does not have to be intimidating. In fact, a pleasant and surprising discovery awaits you: you already have a focused inner drive that is waiting to become useful. I think of this as your *artistic identity*, something that will be forever on hand to guide and inspire you, once you get to know it. Even if you never learn of its existence in your psyche, you will still benefit. I know this because I directed two dozen documentary films before discovering with a shock that my work—maybe my whole life—had been shaped all along by a common theme.

> *Artistic identity* is the source of creativity each of us carries within. Shaped by temperament and biographical circumstances, it is the inner force directing our search to complete our *unfinished business*.

What a lot of time and effort I could have saved had I known this earlier!

3 Finding Your Artistic Identity

The twin drives to find sustenance and meaning are so deep in the human psyche that we perform them unconsciously, like breathing. Maybe it all began during our millions of years as nomadic wanderers, anxious about bodily and spiritual survival and apprehensive about being accepted by the tribe. From the first paintings in caves and the first symbolic statuettes and sculptures, art has always dealt with these primordial human quests.

How do you begin to make art? By searching in depth for what you need, for what truly matters to you. The respected actor and directing teacher Marketa Kimbrell used to say, "To put up a tall building you must first dig a very deep hole." The authors of *Art and Fear* concur, saying that "the only work really worth doing—the only work you *can* do convincingly—is the work that focuses on the things you care about. To not focus on those issues is to deny the constants in your life."[1]

Unfinished Business: How Your Life Has Marked You

Each of us has had formative experiences—usually sustained at high and low times in our lives—that leave us with sensitized scars that one can think of as *marks*. Ignored and unresolved, these marks remain as clues to *unfinished business*. Thus it is perfectly true that "the unexamined life is not worth living."[2] That drive you have to discover and express is really the urge to recognize the marks you carry and the desire to do the work they want you to do.

Anyone who begins identifying their unfinished business soon finds a theme or two. Mine proved to be "breaking out of imprisonment." Within moments of realizing how widely it applied to my work, I literally shivered at seeing its origins in my early life.

A way to give attention to your unfinished business is to make this simple vow: I will tell no story unless it contains something, however small, that I discovered for myself. But, you protest, nothing of importance has happened to me yet. I have nothing to give, nothing to say!

Not true. Everyone from their teens onward has had a taste of every human experience. Metaphorically, you have seen death, been in love, lost a kingdom, fought battles, defied death, been a refugee. You have given, taken, sacrificed, betrayed—because that is what it means to be human.

You do not have to confess any of this unless you particularly want to. Making stories only requires you to care deeply about what people do and why they do it.

Displacement

As everyone knows, fiction writers routinely conceal their sources in life by obscuring and *displacing* telltale details. They alter names, places, the time-period, appearances, and even the gender of their human models.

Indeed, you are free to take any liberty providing your audience can still see credible characters in a credible world. Under the fig-leaf of fiction, you can amalgamate individuals from actuality and create a more comprehensive type of person in your sea captain, one perhaps more true and universally representative. You can split the contradictory aspects of your brother to form two warring neighbors.

> *Displacing* means fictionalizing factual identities. Concealing the characters and circumstances you have used for your fiction lets you explore underlying truths and your relationship to them, but without falling into the legal quicksand of autobiography.

Authors do this because examples from life are often fragmentary and partial, and perhaps do not allow you to tell the whole story. Documentary filmmakers frustrated by all they cannot put on the screen sometimes turn to fiction, and vice versa. Michael Apted's *Incident at Oglala* (1992) questions the justice of putting the Native American leader Leonard Peltier behind bars (Figure 3–1). His next work, *Thunderheart* (1992), was a fictional treatment of the same events that proposes how the FBI made Peltier responsible for the deaths of their agents. Both films are set in the same world, look at the same problems, but use alternative strategies to explore injustice.

To act on your artistic identity, you need only take up the special work it

throws in your path. This may be science work, arts work, medical work, building work, family reparation work, parental work, teaching work, Girl Scout work, historical reconstruction work, psychological work, acting work, writing work, or any other work. There is one proviso: its importance shows itself by making you fearful. Thus important work involves striving to understand and overcome fears.

Here are some assignments to help you find your marks and make a start.

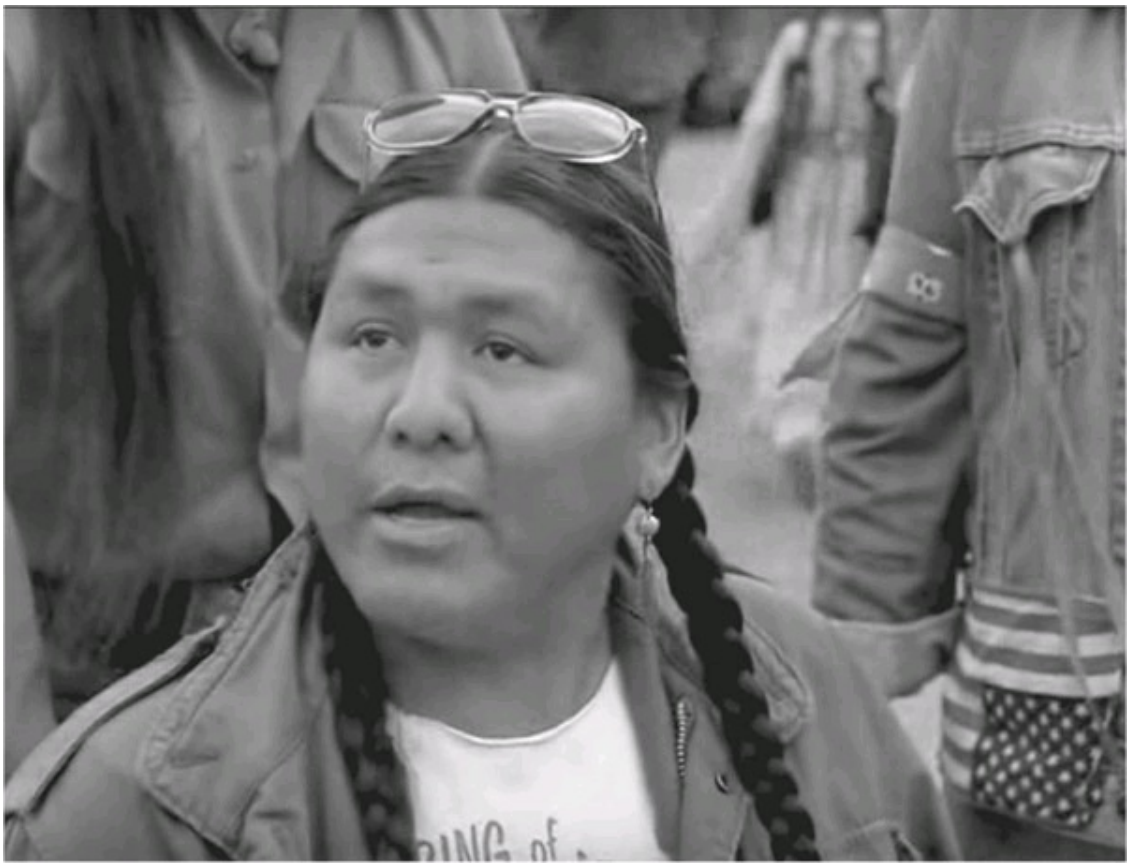


Figure 3–1 Michael Apted's *Incident at Oglala* and *Thunderheart* use documentary and then fictional means to explore the same injustices (frames from the films).

Themes are the persistent meanings lying beneath the surface of narratives. Your own, once you find and accept them, will lead to your *unfinished business*—and vice versa.

Assignment 3–1: Making a Private Self-Inventory (Marks and Themes)

Make notes, privately and nonjudgmentally, of the marks you carry. Do so freely since you need divulge nothing that is private.

***Step 1*: List your key experiences**. By writing in rapid, brief notations whatever comes to mind, make a private, nonjudgmental list of any experiences in your life *that*

profoundly moved you (to joy, rage, panic, fear, disgust, anguish, love, etc.). Keep going until you have six or ten. Some will seem "positive" (accompanied by feelings of joy, relief, discovery, laughter), but most will seem "negative" and have disturbing emotional connotations such as humiliation, shame, or anger. Try not to suppress or prioritize, since doing so is to censor, which is just another way to prolong the endless search for acceptability. Truth is neither negative nor positive, it is just *truth*!

Step 2: **Divide your life into chapters** and about each chapter ask *What was I trying to get, do, or accomplish*? When you have no answer, improvise something that fits plausibly with your actions and predicaments at the time. An artistic identity is always a work in progress that takes inspired guesswork.

Step 3: **Arrange your key experiences in groupings**. On a large piece of paper, group them in any way pertinent. This useful technique, known as *clustering*, will help you discover inherent relationships, connections, and hierarchies.

Step 4: **Note down any theme(s) arising from your mapping**.

Assignment 3–2: Presenting an Important Experience and Its Meaning

Make any brief notes you may need to help you make a presentation. The more candid you can be, the better, but *you need disclose nothing too private*. Everything that needs to happen will do so in its own time.

Step 1: To a person, class, or group, **relate an experience that marked you**. Make the whole presentation no longer than five minutes, and wrap up with a summary of its meaning.

Step 2: **Relate your current writing intentions** by completing these sentences:

- The **kinds of subject** for which I feel most passionately are …

- Probably the main **theme** behind my work will be …
- **Other goals** I presently have for my work are …

An artistic identity is not fixed and terminal, so you are not narrowing your scope by naming it. Rather, you are defining a position from which to make an exploratory artwork. With every new project come discoveries that help you refine and redefine this facet at the core of your being.

Assignment 3–3: What Is the Family Drama?

We learn many of the hardest lessons through interaction with our family while growing up. The family is the great crucible for drama. Why else are all the Greek gods related to each other?

To a person, group, or class,

Step 1: **Describe in two to three minutes the main drama in your family**. If there are many, pick one that most affected you (e.g., the impact of the family business going bankrupt, discovering that Uncle Wilfred is a cross-dresser, or the effect of a dictatorial parent wanting all the kids to become musicians).

Step 2: Say **what you learned** from the way the family drama played out, and what kind of subjects and themes it has left you wanting to tackle as a result.

Discussion

Listen to the presentations as quietly, supportively, and nonjudgmentally as you can, because the presenter feels exposed and vulnerable. Even if you detect self-defense or self-promotion, try to absorb and commit to memory all that the person says. Try to store in memory the following:

- Moments in the presentation that moved you.
- Moments of discomfort—yours or the writer's. What might be at stake there?
- Connections inside the presentation that the writer may not have seen.
- Whatever you learn about the writer that is new and interesting.

- Consistency or connection between the writer's choices of
    - Formative experience and chosen themes.
    - Character types and what else interests the writer.
    - Story type and chosen themes and characters.
    - Preferred work and what else he/she has said.

When you react, limit your discussion to what is constructive. This is a time to build confidence in other people, not risk tearing it down.

Notes

1 David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Saint Paul, MN: Image Continuum Press, 1993), p. 116.

2 Socrates, c. 469–399 BC.

Going Further

To locate books in print, use *Amazon.com*, and check for discounted or used copies at *AbeBooks.com*, the international online booksellers' marketplace. Some works about the artistic process as writers, artists, filmmakers, and choreographers experience it are the following:

Bayles, David and Ted Orland. *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. Image Continuum Press, 2001 (Although geared to graphic art, this book deals with common misconceptions about art in general and with removing the obstacles that stop people from making it).

Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, 10th ed., Tarcher, 2002 (Highly prescriptive and addressed to those suffering "blocks, limiting beliefs, fear, self-sabotage, jealousy, guilt, addictions, and other inhibiting forces." Following this seminal work are numerous spinoffs that may be of interest).

Dannenbaum, Jed, Carroll Hodge, and Doe Mayer. *Creative Filmmaking from the Inside Out: Five Keys to the Art of Making Inspired Movies and Television*. Simon & Schuster, 2003 (How to minimize inbuilt messages of social and ethical bias).

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life.* Knopf, 1995 (Funny and engagingly personal description of the stages a writer

must go through and of the wracking neuroses so many suffer).

Tharp, Twyla and Mark Reiter. *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life.* Simon & Schuster, 2005 (The famous choreographer shares a lifetime of discoveries about how to prepare for, maintain, and deliver on one's creative potential. Directly and personably written, and relevant to any difficult endeavor).

4 Autobiography and Influences

This chapter is about constructing a detailed self-profile. Its work will help you recognize the most significant marks you carry, and the highly significant people who have made a special impact. They can be friends, family members, or even characters in fiction. Each has helped liberate an important aspect of yourself. Some you will already know about, others may come as a surprise. Each such person leads us to discover aspects of ourselves and to fulfill our innate potential.

Though it is important to recognize and use your core experiences, this book asks you to write very little that is directly autobiographical. Whenever you find indirect ways to explore issues of personal importance, however, your work will probably become charged, authentic, and fascinating.

Assignment 4–1: What Influenced You?

Using the prompts below, make brief notes of whatever experience left a strong mark on you—good or bad. Don't feel you must find an answer to every question; deal only with what elicits significant information. Whatever emerges from this survey can be thoroughly honest since nobody else will see it.

Beginnings: Year and place you were born, special circumstances and conditions, any special religious or social conditions, any unusual circumstances concerning your parents.

Health: Special events, accidents, diseases.

Early influences: Special friends, visitors, neighbors, local characters.

Relations: Siblings, cousins, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and so on, who played a special role in your life.

School: Schools you attended, special courses, influential teachers, special events or traumas, special friendships or antipathies.

Special activities: Jobs, tasks at home, membership in group activities or sports.

Journeys: Memorable travels, holidays, migrations, escapes, or

quests by your family or yourself.

Adolescence: For most people this is a war zone. What was most at stake for you?

Major conflicts: What have been the major conflicts in your life?

People you have loved: These can be family members, your first love, or those you fell in love with subsequently. What did you learn?

People you have hated: People for whom you've had a strong aversion. When was it, and why? What did you learn?

Work: Work you trained for or were made to do.

Avocations: Work that you wanted to do, such as hobbies, crafts, special interests.

Arts: Special experience or influences that turned you on to the arts—music, graphic art, plays, books, poetry, authors, movies, movie directors, and so on.

Beliefs: Religious or philosophical ideas or believers that influenced your path.

Celebrations: Any memorable special events, festivals, or reunions.

Life's lessons: Experiences, whether troubling or uplifting, that have deeply marked you and have altered your direction.

Future: Plans, hopes, and fears that you have at the moment.

Keep your answers in mind as you do the next assignment, which involves making a short oral presentation on people who left their mark. One person at the top of my list would be Margaret Powell Lesser (Figure 4–1), a former nurse who appeared in one of my films. She volunteered to go to Spain during the 1936–1939 Civil War. Newly trained and very young, she found herself triaging dozens of seriously wounded soldiers, having to decide alone who should see the only surgeon and who was beyond help and going to die. In a single ghastly experience, her youth vanished, and haunted by the story thirty years later, she wept to remember it.

Figure 4–1 Margaret Powell, a nurse marked for life by an appalling wartime responsibility (photo courtesy of Ruth Muller).

Assignment 4–2: Who Influenced You?

Who has deeply moved you? The goal here is to supplement what you learned from the previous assignment.

Step 1: Make a short list of *people known to you* who have made an impact on you. Include those exerting a bad influence as well as those whose mark was good—but leave out immediate family members, as they usually overcomplicate the exercise.

Step 2: List four *characters* from literature, cinema, or theatre with whom you feel a powerful connection. That affinity can be hero-worship, but it becomes more interesting when you respond to darker or more complex qualities. Arrange your characters by their importance to you.

Step 3: Do the same for four *public figures* (such as actors, artists, politicians, sports, or historical figures).

Step 4: Speak for no more than five minutes, describing your top person in each category. Focus on the particular qualities to which you resonate and anything they have in common.

Discussion

Try using these issues:

- Were there any common themes?
- Did some seem specific to the speaker's gender?
- What stays in your memory as special and unusual?
- Who did you find yourself admiring for their frankness, and what particularly impressed you?
- Who did you come to know best from their presentation?

5 Playing CLOSAT and Pitching Ideas

Scheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights* puts off her execution by enchanting the king with a different tale every night. She does not reveal how she keeps going, but her inventiveness makes her indispensable to the king's happiness.

Improvising

Actors, comedians, and other performers fascinate us with their quick-witted talent for invention. In Chicago, where I live, there is Second City, a theatre school for would-be comedians. They practice until they can make up scenes on the spot. From any chance combination of situations and identities yelled out by the audience, they create something meaningful—and have enormous fun doing it. Some alumni have become very famous.[1]

We call this a talent, but anybody with enough courage can learn to do it. Think back to an occasion when your friends howled with laughter because you somehow became effortlessly funny. Improvising is like a kite taking off, a situation when our unconsciously stored experiences spill out under the right situation. This is your intuitive self, your native aptitude at work. But this fluid intelligence is as perverse as a donkey; try to strong-arm it into delivering, and it digs in its heels and refuses. Only when you relax and trust it does it work. There are no advance guarantees. The optimal conditions seem to be that you:

> To *improvise* means to act spontaneously and intuitively in relation to stimuli of some kind. We improvise best under pressure and when we trust our instincts to sustain us.

- Confront a situation of risk that you may or may not overcome.
- Plunge into action without plans or forethought.
- Know you are sunk if you stop to think, so you don't.
- Stay in the moment and trust that your intuition will make good choices. It does.

Sports players know that submitting to trained instinct is vital to winning.

Thus players in top form can simultaneously relax, act on intuition, and perform extraordinary feats. It is a psychological state because the watching spectators help intensify their focus. However, when players get rattled and lose their nerve, you see it immediately. They are like construction workers: one falls from the steelwork, and the others lose confidence and follow.

Maintaining Focus

Paradoxically, you maintain focus by abandoning everything that calculates risk. To stay focused, you must stay in the here-and-now, says the great acting teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky. Never look ahead at where you are going or back at where you have been. Stop your ego judging how well you are doing, for then you become a divided being: one part tries to go on playing your character, another part subjects you to the imagined scrutiny of the onlookers. Then you become painfully self-conscious, self-judging, and dysfunctional. Everyone has been there.

For a writer, improvising is a valuable skill. Becoming at ease with anyone around, taking risks, and elaborating ideas on the spot takes a headlong trust that you will emerge bruised but elated. And of course with practice you mostly do. The occasional spill helps you come out less afraid.

Practice improvisation in daily life by making yourself act upon each new situation with something spontaneous and a little unexpected, something made up on the spot. That way you enliven the routine of cashiers, train passengers, students trudging to school, and old people sitting on park benches. This is your practice for composing and presenting stories, and whenever you do it, people will remember you because you entertained them.

Pitching

To pitch a story idea means orally presenting its essentials in just a few minutes. You aim to move your listeners with a brief description of your intended story's attractions and purpose. Ideally you leave them wanting to hear more.

Being a salesperson for yourself is never easy, but it's important to break down the walls of shyness so you can demonstrate what you carry inside. You do not have to become showy and egotistical. Simply work at shucking your

phobias while remaining the same simple, direct person you really are.

As you pitch a scene, you'll quickly sense whether your audience is taking to your idea. A warm audience extends an indefinable glow while a cool audience holds back and challenges you to draw them out.

A *scene* is an episode or a sequence of events that usually takes place in one locale or during one stretch of time.

When, conversely, someone is pitching a story and you are in the audience, support the person making the pitch by giving them your undivided attention, and by signaling appreciation for any risks they take. In jazz concerts, the audience applauds when something special takes place—an exchange between the players perhaps, or an inventive solo. In pitching sessions the audience cannot be so expressive, but their support is always tangible. Whether you are giving or receiving support, you'll feel it taking place. Speaker and listeners become an ensemble, with the whole joyously greater than its parts.

If You Are Working Alone

If you are using this book solo, you will need people to whom you can pitch your ideas. Stories are living, growing, changing seed organisms whose soil is an audience. Thus, the more people you can find to work with, the richer your feedback will be. It's fascinating to see how differently each person or group reacts to a similar pitch, and what a broad spectrum of possibility emerges.

Assignment 5–1: Five-Minute Self-Introduction

Step 1: *Introduce yourself* in 5 minutes or less by giving what personal interests, obstacles, or difficulties have led you to be interested in developing story ideas.

Step 2: *Say what type of work specially attracts you* (such as short story writing, documentaries, electronic or website journalism, or writing feature films) and why.

Assignment 5–2: Trying the CLOSAT Game

Here is some introductory experience at improvising a CLOSAT scene, using some of the twelve ready-made sample cards at the end of this chapter. This will work a little differently depending on whether you are working alone or in a group.

Step 1: Picking randomly from the specimen cards at the end of this chapter, select until you have as "givens" one location, one object, and two characters. Divide into groups of three or four persons, choosing one person as secretary.

Step 2: Taking no more than ten minutes of discussion, the group improvises materials for a short scene making use of the givens. The secretary takes notes.

Step 3: At presentation time, each secretary chooses what to pitch to the audience, describing a scene invented by his or her group from the common ingredients.

If you are working alone, your auditors can choose the cards and give you feedback about your improvised scene. You can turn the tables and invite them to improvise a scene from cards you deal them. Improvising scenes under the gun is a lot of fun and shows how stories that develop from a common starting point can be wildly different and imaginative.

Discussion of CLOSAT Scenes

- What elements of the presentations were most effective?
- What tellings could you most clearly see in your mind's eye?
- What seemed a particularly ingenious and effective use of the *givens*? (See sidebar.)
- Which pitch did you most like, and why?

The *givens* of a scene are the who, what, when, and where that frame the action and determine aspects of the scene's content.

Assignment 5–3: The Group Develops Its Own Pitching Guidelines

Based on the experience you just had as an audience member and/or as presenter, take fifteen minutes for each group to imagine guidelines for anyone making their first pitch. Try using these prompts:

- What made the stories most effective?
- What helps a presenter get story essentials across quickly?
- What kind of critical feedback is most helpful for writers after their pitch?

Discussion of Pitch Guidelines

- What differences in criteria did people adopt?
- Did the guidelines consider:
    - Presenter's manner or pacing?
    - The way time was used?
    - How the pitch was structured?
    - Ideas for the etiquette of criticism?
- What feedback enthuses a presenter to do more work, and what discourages?
- What main ideas and principles stand as an overall statement?

General Discussion

Explore any or all of the following:

- In which stories did the characters come alive, and why?
- Which stories had some kind of conflict—that is, something for the main character to push against?
- Did anyone in any story change or grow?
- Which stories had a satisfactory conclusion or *resolution* (see sidebar)?
- Which stories or parts of stories were fresh and managed to avoid stereotypes?
- Which story most left you wondering, "What will happen next?"

Conflict, the struggle between opposing forces, determines the action in a drama. External conflict exists when the struggle is between characters, or between a character and natural law or fate. Internal conflict exists when a character experiences inner struggle.

The *resolution* to a dramatic situation is whatever action concludes and resolves the situation's conflict.

On Working Collaboratively

Working in a group runs counter to the romantic myth that art can only come from the individual. Collectively critiquing, solving problems, and developing working principles is fun and important because it's exploring common values, so important in an audience medium. Until the Middle Ages or later, all theatre was made by a team without designated leadership. Even today, more comedy is written by teams than by individuals.

You'll be amazed at how much wisdom, balance, and good sense exists in a group, particularly after you have all become comfortable with each other. Developing ideas through discussion may be slow, but when each person contributes, everyone gains practice and learns from each other. Unlike lectures and lessons, you forget nothing you helped to invent.

Cards You'll Need to Play CLOSAT

MGH	Rita, Distressed Yogi	C

Beside her constant stretching and movement, this fortyish woman wears the stress and discomfort of a week's trouble upon her brow. Her smooth, black Lycra body suit and deep purple sweater contrast with the sagging lines of her forlorn face. Her gestures are graceful but vain.

SNW	Uncle James	C

Has half an index finger. Holds his vodka bottle with pride and is rejuvenated by the first sip. Walks with a slight stagger. Most people know him. Some wave. Couldn't care less about others' perceptions of him. Has insightful conversations and is reliable for a good laugh. A tattered survivor living mostly in the streets. Needs a hug on occasion. Lonely eyes.

AJM	Kid with Dinosaur (Obsession)	C

Restless boy of nine. When not thumbing through books on paleontology, he hunts in the backyard for dinosaur bones or any other clue the giant lizards may have left behind. Keeps a docile iguana named Spike near him most of the time, usually on his shoulder. His parents have nearly given up hope on their son and his all-consuming passion.

BAB	Leonardo Zaccanti, Mob Boss	C

Huge, obese fifty-six-year-old man in a white suit. Often sits in an ugly relic of a chair from the 1970s, smoking a cigar. Likes to click through the TV stations looking for something good, like Miami Vice. Laughs at witty things he says to himself in Italian.

ACG	A Postcard	O

Fresh and new, with no postage and no date. On the front is a Confederate flag, and the back reads, “Keys are with Jay.” There is no postmark or return address.

MGA	Somebody’s Black Glove	O

Black leather, dulled from harsh conditions, lying lonely in the gutter. Thumb and forefinger worn so low that barely a translucent skin has survived. Charcoal ashes coat the crevices between the fingers; the smell of peanut butter emanates from the whole glove.

PPR	Dancing Clown	O

The small, primary-colored box rests quietly on the countertop, one side open like a diorama. Inside is a garishly smiling clown with elastic limbs frozen in a jig, his arms and legs bent unnaturally. Later the box will be wound, and he will be summoned to perform, jerking spasmodically.

KDL	Arizona Dream Poster	O

A big poster titled “Arizona Dream.” In the center is a big fish flying up into the sky. At the right upper side we see the moon, and behind the fish is a huge cactus, standing in the vast, spreading desert.

MH	Freight Elevator	L

A freight elevator, the kind only used for moving large things, in an old tea factory. Two sides are not enclosed. It is a platform that rises through space … gray, cold. You can see great black cables all the way to the top, where they melt into darkness. Precarious-sounding groans are heard in the darkness as the gray floors go by.

JP	Narrow Walkway	L

A narrow walkway between a park that is next to a river on one side and, on the other, a four-lane highway filled with speeding cars. Newspapers and plastic bags are flying in the strong wind made by the cars. There are a few thin trees, which don't have any leaves. No one is in the park.

TGO	The Uncrowded Restaurant	L

The walls are all painted a very light pink. There is only one huge window, which shows all the cabs driving on Third Avenue. Long, thin mirrors cover the other wall. The waiters, all wearing black vests and white shirts, sit at the table nearest the kitchen. They look bored. The sound of the street is all that can be heard.

MFA	A Shack	L

A green meadow, then the lush foliage of trees and flowers of many colors. A crystal blue stream runs alongside the road, which has become a narrow cobblestone path. Behind ten feet of dirt, a shack composed of trashed wood panels and rusty nails stands proud. Classical music comes from within the shack.

Figure 5–1 Cards for Playing CLOSAT.

Note

1 To name just a few: Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Alan Arkin, Joan Rivers, Harold Ramis, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, John Candy, Martin Short, Gilda Radner, Jim Belushi, and Mike Myers.

6 Working from Life

First-rate writers, actors, comedians, painters, and photographers all develop acute observational skills, and so should a writer. From your sharpest observation of whatever strikes you as odd, funny, or strange come patterns and then narratives. To see how easily life-observations can turn into stories, we're going to make further use of the improvising game CLOSAT. It is a great warm-up exercise at the beginning of a class, and an excellent refresher when minds grow tired. Its title, as you will recall, comes from its observation categories: **C**haracters, **L**ocations, **O**bjects, **S**ituations, **A**cts, and **T**hemes. From random combinations you can cook up many an imaginative scene or story. The game's value is that you:

- Learn to trust your intuition
- Get used to producing fast sketches, as valuable to writers as to graphic artists
- See how stories suggest their own form and development

By working in a group or class, you discover how each person's mind works and what pleasure collaboration brings.

Assignment 6–1: The Writer's Journal and Preparing for CLOSAT

Step 1: Keep your writer's journal close and *note any promising characters, locations, objects, situations, acts, and themes.*

Step 2: Select material from your journal writer's journal and *make six* CLOSAT *playing cards*, two each for Characters, Locations, and Objects. Reduce your observations to telling detail.

Step 3: Code each card at the top with your initials, a tag line, and its CLOSAT type (see sample cards, end of Chapter 5).

Assignment 6–2: Play CLOSAT with Two Characters, One Location, and One Object

If you are working alone:

- Make piles of cards, one each for Characters, Locations, and Objects. Shuffle them and lay them face down.
- Take two Characters and one Location and Object from the piles.
- Play CLOSAT, taking only ten minutes before presenting the result to a listener or listeners.

If you are part of a group/class:

- Designate a group secretary for each round so the position rotates.
- Exchange piles face down so each group works blind with another groups cards.
- Someone draws two cards from the Character pile and one each from the Location and Object piles.
- The group plays CLOSAT from the cards it has drawn, putting heads together for ten minutes only before the group secretaries present each groups work. When the group generates surplus or contradictory material, the secretary improvises the best telling.

It will be a delight to learn what people managed to do with a roll of worn-out orange carpeting, a shy young woman gospel singer, and a postal truck driver with his leg in a cast*and* it must all happen on a mountain footpath in the early morning mist!

A character who *develops* is one who learns enough from the storys circumstances to alter their actions in future. A story can be equally instructive and satisfying, however, when a character fails to adapt and change.

Development

In the stories you have been telling, did any of the characters developthat is, did anyone learn something and change?

Even in the earliest recorded tales, storytellers seemed aware that audiences wanted the main character to learn and grow. In the terminology of drama, this is called the characters *development.* Audiences still look for it, because

the human need for hope is a constant. Probably that hunger lies behind our prodigious appetite for stories in the first place. Even so, the element of hope can be very modest, and just a small, symbolic action after a long and grueling situation is enough to suggest that change is underway. A story about a rebellious daughter might end with her washing her own dishes for the first time or going out in wet weather wearing more practical shoes. Such actions, even though taken in strife and heartbreak, can be richly satisfying because we understand that she will eventually prosper and her spirit will remain unbroken.

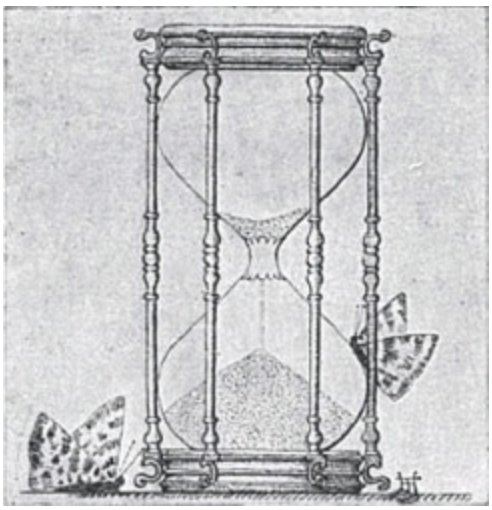


Figure 6–1 An hourglass can transcend its original function and connote the brevity of human existence (drawing by Thomas Hardy).

Denotation and *connotation.* An hourglass is an ancient form of clock, but in the right circumstances it transcends its humble denotation by poetically connoting mortality.

By artfully building contexts, the author can invest prosaic objects, events, or characters with poetic meanings that transcend their everyday appearances. Objects and acts are particularly useful since they can be made to connote meaning far beyond what they are or what they denote (Figure 6–1).

The human *memory*, also called *recall*, will effortlessly winnow the best story elements and discard all else from its mass of story materials. Trust your memory to help you edit.

Discussion

So long as these story issues get discussed, their order isnt important:

- We generally recall best what most engages us. Which group's story stands out in memory? You may want to concentrate on analyzing this story alone.
- Of the characters, which did you feel you know best, and why? (A little highly selective information can mean more than a catalogue of bland detail.)
- Which story seemed the strongest, and why?
- Which story had the most satisfying development, and what was its nature? (Don't be too critical of the rapidly improvised fragments you produced today, but you probably saw that characters who stay in an unchanging situation are not dramatically satisfying. They are credible but not interesting.)
- What made a character more compelling? (Usually it's because that character was active, had an agenda of some kind, and was *trying to get, do, or accomplish* something.)
- How functional was the location? (Novice writers often let human interactions take place without regard to their settings. But the mood and meaning of a setting can powerfully affect us; it can suggest or limit action in useful ways, and make us feel more connected to the protagonist's situation.)

A *point-of-view* (POV) character in a scene or story is one whose experiences, feelings, or attitudes mainly shape our perceptions.

Point of View (POV)

An important aspect of storytelling that will often concern us is point of view. In most narrative forms there is a character or characters through whose experiences we mainly perceive the events. Often this is the person with most potential to change and develop. For dramatic effect or storytelling convenience, POV can shift between characters. Some of the most interesting

become *unreliable narrators*, because we have to take into account the nature of their subjectivity.

In your early drafts, you may not know who should be the POV character that shapes our perceptions. Even after you solve this, you may still choose to route the audience's perceptions through minor characters with differing subjective perceptions.

Settings and *dramatic detail* help define characters and augment their predicaments. Render them in brief, colorful, pithy description but do not let them slow *story momentum*.

Active characters are always trying to get, do, or accomplish things. Their more profound goals are often unknown to them or even concealed. *Passive characters* are people to whom things happen. Both types have agendas, of course, and use different strategies to effect them.

Active voice: when you write in the active voice, your characters have *agency*, and your story acquires authority.

Active and Passive

Characters who are trying to get, do, or accomplish things struggle to act on their surroundings. We, however, are often taught to see ourselves as acted upon, and thus write scientifically in the passive voice. The phrase I have just used, "are often taught," is passive and implies that children, being on the receiving end, are victims. Official language bristles with passive-voice constructions because the writers want to remove themselves from "agency"—that is, from holding responsibility. Some languages assist by saying literally, "The cup dropped and broke itself."

Habitually we see ourselves trying to please others, falling into line with forces beyond our control, and using language that unconsciously embraces our helplessness. Although I have known this all my life, I still catch lapses in my writing—or rather, Microsoft Word does it for me by underlining my

lapses in wiggly green lines. The worst humiliation is to discover your proactive heroine thinking, "Because I am being laughed at, I can see how badly I am treated." Growling at yourself, you substitute, "Seeing how they laugh at me, I think I'll tackle them." The revision is short, supple, and leads into action.

The Nascent Power of Imagery

Your CLOSAT observations and images will be useful when you come to tackle fiction assignments. With your news clippings, they will help you tackle news and documentary projects, and by joining, juxtaposing, extending, and interrogating them, you will have multiple pathways to fictional tales. The images you choose may lodge in our memories and imagination, as one did for the novelist John Fowles, who began his bestseller from the mystery of remembered moment. Living at Lyme Regis by the English Channel, he saw a young woman staring out to sea toward France. This iconic figure led to his enormously popular *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) in which she became the rebellious Victorian governess Sarah Woodruff (Figure 6–2). Deserted after an affair with a French lieutenant, she becomes a fatal magnet to the conventional, already engaged scientist Charles, whose decent rationality is no match for his romantic self.

Figure 6–2 A novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, came from an image

seen by the author, and from the novel came the feature film of the same name (frame from the film).

W. G. Sebald's highly elliptical, autobiographically flavored novels of ideas, such as *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and *Austerlitz* (2001), reproduce the photographs, architectural drawings, train schedules, and bus tickets that have proliferated during the author's own journeys of inquiry, and that have turned into talismanic objects.

Assignment 6–3: Instant CLOSAT Using Pictures

Once everyone becomes somewhat comfortable with improvising, ask them to bring two (properly coded) images for each of the CLOSAT categories. Stories now originate in groups or by individuals—according to whatever rules the class or group adopts. You may use these suggestions:

Version 1: On the spot, the leader makes a CLOSAT card selection (say three characters, two locations, three objects, and a theme), and asks a group to come up with a two-scene story in three minutes.

Version 2: Put up a similar set of CLOSAT cards, then spin a pencil like a roulette wheel to see whom it picks to tell the next story. This makes everyone invent something for every set of cards.

Going Further

Try **Assignment 6–4: CLOSAT with Three Characters, Two Objects, an Act, and a Theme** (see www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger). If you enjoyed improvising from randomly generated elements, try the games in the books below.

Biro, Yvette and Marie-Geneviève Ripeau. *To Dress a Nude: Exercises in Imagination*. Kendall Hunt, 1998 (A structured approach to developing stories from found artifacts, such as a photograph, painting, or piece of music, and an alternative approach to screenwriting in its own right).

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, 5th ed., Focal

Press, 2013, pp. 261–282 (After tossing a coin, you may be asked to write a three-character, four-minute comedy scene called "Embarrassing Moment," set late at night, with a main character the same age and gender as yourself, the main conflict being internal to one of the other characters, and the scene's crisis to be placed near the beginning).

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater*. Northwestern University Press, first published 1963 (This classic and influential text, reprinted many times, is intended for improvisational work with children, but its methods work with people of all ages. Its philosophy lies behind Second City, Chicago's famous school of "improv" comedy, which over the decades has produced actors, comedians, and directors of stellar repute).

Part III

Craft and Concepts of Drama

Your job as a storyteller is to entertain people by making them feel and think in unfamiliar ways. For this, you will need imagination, astute observation of those around you, and evocative language to seduce people into seeing the worlds you create.

This part of the book is a brief primer in populating, assessing, overhauling, and fine-tuning any story—your own or someone else's. It shows you how to develop analytic skills and how to offer your sensations and opinions to other people about their work.

Whenever you act as critic, you will need to change hats and venture your feelings, reactions, and ideas from the perspective of a reader or audience member. You will see me doing this in my critiques of the assignment samples in Chapters 13–21.

First, though, we must establish some working principles. These may be unfamiliar, so I suggest you first read these chapters through, just to see what's there. Then, try applying anything attractive to something you or someone else has written.

A word of warning about the composition stage: whenever you turn to composing new material, you must lock away all conscious analysis and theory, because the proud intellect will rush in and hobble your imagination. Only after you finish a first messy draft is it safe to put on your story-editing hat and take up the story editor's tools.

7 Characters, Their Problems and Conflicts

Ask your friends who is special in their lives, and they will probably tell you about someone kind, patient, loyal, or funny. But if that person were to become functional in a narrative, you would need more than typifying adjectives, because those would trap him or her in the kind of single, functional pose you see in illustrations.

Figure 7–1, from a 19th-century American travelogue, typifies each of its four characters from the perspective of the artist: there are the two loyal, dutiful captors; their shifty Indian prisoner; and Major Downing, who "surveyed [Spotted Horse] for a while in meditative serenity" before proposing to roast him alive.[1] Notice how the storyteller's prejudices are implicit in what he thinks true and typical.

Figure 7–1 How each person is made typical in "The Capture of Spotted

Horse."

In drama you cannot define characters as "typical" in this way, that is, frozen as a concept. They must be *doing* things, not just being. The difference between doing and being is something no trained actor can afford to overlook. One is kinetic and natural to acting, the other makes development impossible.

A character's problem is the major difficulty that he or she must solve, and that determines his or her all-important agenda of activities.

On receiving their parts, actors comb the script for clues, asking "what drives my character?" and "What is my character trying to accomplish?" Each player searches for his or her character's *dramatic problem.* This means finding the source of that character's unfinished business, the energy driving that character's will or volition, and what creates the trajectory we call the character's *agenda.*

Even a humble spider can have a problem and an agenda:

Itsy Bitsy spider climbed up the waterspout
Down came the rain and washed the spider out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain,
So Itsy Bitsy spider climbed up the spout again.

By its nature a spider must climb, but Itsy Bitsy's misfortune is to choose a drain as a pathway, and to have his intention or *agenda* trounced by a deluge. Figure 7–2 shows his efforts in a graph using Time as its horizontal coordinate and Will as the vertical.

Conflict, a key component in drama, is the result of a character's blocked will. Be on guard—define someone's conflict too easily, there is usually a better and more embracing definition lurking out of sight.

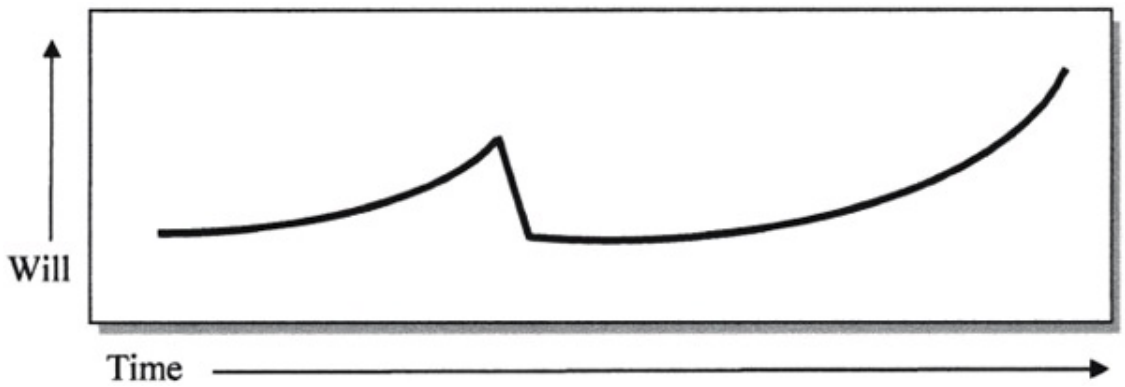


Figure 7–2 The spider's will to succeed graphed over time, with peaks and troughs reflecting the will he puts into fulfilling his agenda.

You can expose the dynamics in any scene by translating its dominant pressures through time in a graph that undulates, like the changing pitch of notes on a stave in a piece of music.

In drama as in life, a character's push to achieve something invariably involves *conflict*. Itsy Bitsy wants to go upward, but the rushing water pushes him down. What to do? As he ponders this, the weather changes so that he can complete his mission after all. The moral? Things change, and patience sometimes brings change. The nursery rhyme's *theme*, or residual meaning, is that anyone can overcome adversity with patience and persistence.

Here's a situation of internal conflict from real life. When she was in her twenties, a friend whom I'll call Tatiana began to suspect from a remark dropped by a family friend that she was adopted. This very much bothered her, but she could not bring herself to confront her mother. Her *problem* was to become unsure of her origins. Who am I? Who were my parents? Who's telling the truth?

Thirty more years of turbulent life passed before she screwed up the courage to question her mother, now very fragile and in her nineties. Indeed, Tatiana was adopted as a small child, and now she got the details of her biological parents. Thus her agenda changed as she began another highly emotional journey of discovery.

Conflict—internal and external—happens in many ways, and is related to the human need to find meaning by pushing against adversity. You push to get your tax returns completed, to get your aunt's funeral arranged, or to raise

a smile on your glum mailman's face. We humans are always pushing to do, to find out, to complete, to restore, to get, to accomplish. Notice how these are all "doing" words, that is, verbs. But doing means forever encountering obstacles. You have a math exam coming up, yet you put off studying. Is it that you hate math? Or are you convinced you'll fail? What is the overriding problem underlying your conflict?

A person's *volition* (her will to get, do, or accomplish) arises from temperament, life circumstances, and the imperative sent out by those *marks* incised by experience, which we have called *unfinished business*. They shape how we see and act, so that the many small deeds of daily life are really the subsidiary parts of a much larger, long-lasting drive. Dramaturgy calls this a character's *agenda.* Tatiana's was to know her identity, and to somehow complete herself. And perhaps she did—as much as any person can do.

Unfinished business is the agenda of tasks that our psyche wants us to engage in and complete. Unless you force it into consciousness, it works subliminally in the background.

Profiling Someone's Agenda

Seeing your own agenda is as difficult and unsettling as seeing yourself in profile. Luckily it is rather easier to see other people's agendas. You start by making a patient, nonjudgmental observation of their actions, especially those that seem charged, heightened, or contradictory. Keep an open mind, and (privately) construct a hypothetical explanation to embrace the causes and effects you have so far seen. Be open to everything, not just what you hope or expect to find. This is especially important if you are a journalist, documentary-maker, or other professional observer of humankind. Your subject might, for instance, show:

- A disdain for intellectuals and intellectual work. (Envy and suspicion of those better educated?)
- A driving need to publicly protest certain kinds of injustice. (Experience of unjust treatment, or anger over the abuse of a loved one?)
- A great need for mentors. (Compensating for someone important in early

life who was absent?)

The meanings to these important issues remain bubbling below the surface and are seldom articulated or even recognized by their owners. These underlying truths we call *subtexts*. A couple may be arguing over whose turn it is to take out the garbage, but the likely subtext is, "This marriage is in trouble because he expects her to do all the menial work."

A *subtext* is an embracing, unstated truth existing below the surface of events.

To make your fictional characters true to life, consider making them preoccupied and unaware of the larger dimension and likely subtexts. Your audience will enjoy guessing at the other four-fifths of the iceberg below the surface. Why? Maybe it comes from being tribal creatures for millions of years. Our well-being depended on fitting into the group, so we remain hardwired to second-guess others, compelled to pursue what makes them tick.

Once you start searching, hints and clues arise along the way. I sometimes wondered what drove a friend of mine, a heavy-drinking Leftist who lived on a London barge. He led an activist's life and was passionately critical of power structures. One day he confided that when he was a twelve-year-old altar boy his priest had shocked him by kissing him. Rightly or wrongly—I never found out—I saw a vital connection between the urgency and bitterness of his political life, the failure of his short marriage, and his disdain for all authority figures. One day he vanished, and his body was found days later in the river. I have often wondered whether a person's whole destiny really can turn upon a single, dreadful moment.

Each of us moves under an agenda fueled by striking experiences. More often these are multiple rather than single ones. We are all marked, all shaped to particular purposes and drives in life. How we go about accomplishing the objectives in our agenda helps determine what others make of us, particularly those baffled souls in our family. So much remains hidden, and so the dramatist's job is to shine light on what may really be going on.

Some people, you might argue, are so passive that they have no agenda.

Don't be fooled: Benjamin in *The Graduate* has an agenda all right—to resist being sucked into the suffocating lifestyle of his parents' generation. Likewise, the bohemians in Rick Linklater's *Slacker* have agendas—hence their lives of resistance and dissimulation. They know what they *don't* want, and pursue highly active strategies of avoidance.

To make your characters appealing and credible, give them issues to work on, things they want to get, do, or accomplish. Usually they won't be conscious of their underlying issues, or know what subconscious pressures drive them. People tend to concentrate fiercely on what preoccupies them, and do not see the larger picture of interaction. Your characters won't know what they are really doing, or why—but you, their creator must.

Let's pause to visualize two in interacting, unaware agendas in a simplified world (Figure 7–3). Here, a cat stalks a sparrow, and the graph superimposes their two agendas.

We can *identify* with both the cat's hunting instinct and the bird's vulnerability, so we watch in a state of suspense, or *dramatic tension.* Were it comedy, and the cat and bird named Sylvester and Tweety, that tension would still exist, but as comedy. Dramatic tension—in comedy, tragedy, folktale, or legend alike—causes a vital stream of questioning inside us. Will Sylvester catch Tweety, or will the cheeky little bird outwit him again? Will Benjamin, suspended underwater in the swimming pool, quietly drown himself? What matters is that internally we question the unfolding drama and even argue with it.

Story material often makes us *identify* with one or more of the characters. It is attractively human to invest our emotions in the fate of others—even to feel we "are" the central character. This is why we love stories from such an early age.

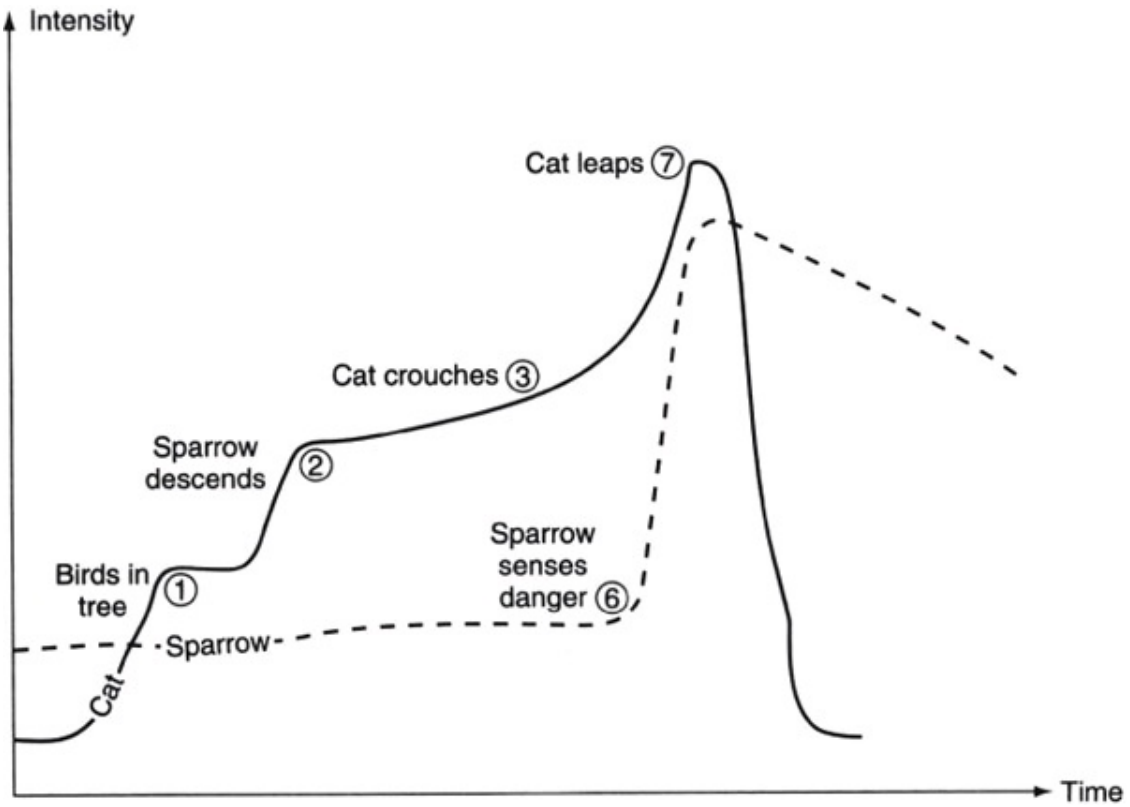


Figure 7–3 Intensity graph for a cat stalking a sparrow. The dotted line indicates the intensity of the sparrow's consciousness, and the solid line, the cat's.

Thus storytellers must keep us, their audience, stimulated, intrigued, and questioning. That stimulates our imaginations, makes us exercise our judgment and experience of life, so that we become open to larger issues—the exploitation of the weak by the strong, say, or how some people seem to face unfair adversity throughout their life.

Dramaturgy

We can use dramaturgical terms to analyze and discuss drama. The cat and bird scene would break down into something like this:

	Action	*Dramatic Category*
1	Cat goes on the alert as a flock of sparrows arrives in a tree.	**Inciting moment**. The cat's instincts are aroused and we know something is going to happen. What will the cat do? His *problem* is that he must restrain his terrible urge to pounce.

2	A single sparrow descends nearby.	**Complication #1**. A development in the hunt intensifies our expectations. How will the cat react to this added temptation? The *obstacles* to the cat's plan are the distance he must leap and the target sparrow's general wariness.
3	The cat lashes his tail and crouches.	**Complication #2**. The cat's murderous concentration increases our sense of the sparrow's danger. Has the bird seen the cat? Can the cat leap the distance?
4	Sparrow pecks unconcerned.	**Complication #3**. Yikes, the sparrow hasn't seen the danger. Are these his last moments? Oh no!
5	Cat gathers himself for a leap.	**Crisis** imminent. The tension is rising because the kill seems inevitable.
6	Sparrow senses danger.	**Reversal**. High dramatic tension as the bird realizes the cat's intentions. Who will succeed, cat or bird?
7	Cat leaps as sparrow takes off.	**Crisis** completed. The cat is not quick enough and the sparrow has escaped. What will the cat do now?
8	Cat fails, licks his shoulder, and returns to bird-watching.	**Resolution**. Cat returns to stalking prey. He is well fed, and can afford to wait and watch.

The concepts in bold print come from the poets and dramatists of ancient Greece, but two centuries back they became a useful little graphic known as Freytag's pyramid (Figure 7–4). Geometrical rather than undulating, and using *climax* rather than *crisis*, Freytag's pyramid makes the central concept into a paradigm—that of a buildup and release of conflicting forces. The scene's *rising action* starts with the *inciting moment* and *exposition*, goes through escalating complications, leads to the dramatic *crisis*, or *climax*, and ends with the *falling action* or *resolution*. From Freytag we see that the crisis is pivotal, a hinge for the entire scene. The *rising action* before it, and the *falling action* after, makes drama proceed by cycles rather like breathing.

To assess a scene, first define its *crisis, climax*, or *turning point*. Before it

is the buildup of opposing forces leading to confrontation; after it, begins the *outcome* or *scene resolution*. The crisis is thus the pivotal point at which fortunes change.

Whether your scene concerns starting an old car, lugging a sofa bed up a staircase, or a couple making love in an attic, you can break its stages into dramatic units whose rising and falling intensities translate into an overall *dramatic arc*. Momentum for this begins from the *inciting moment* during the scene's all-important *setup*. Whatever information the audience needs to understand the characters and their situation is called *exposition*. As a rule, give no more than necessary and wait to add more later, once the scene has gathered momentum.

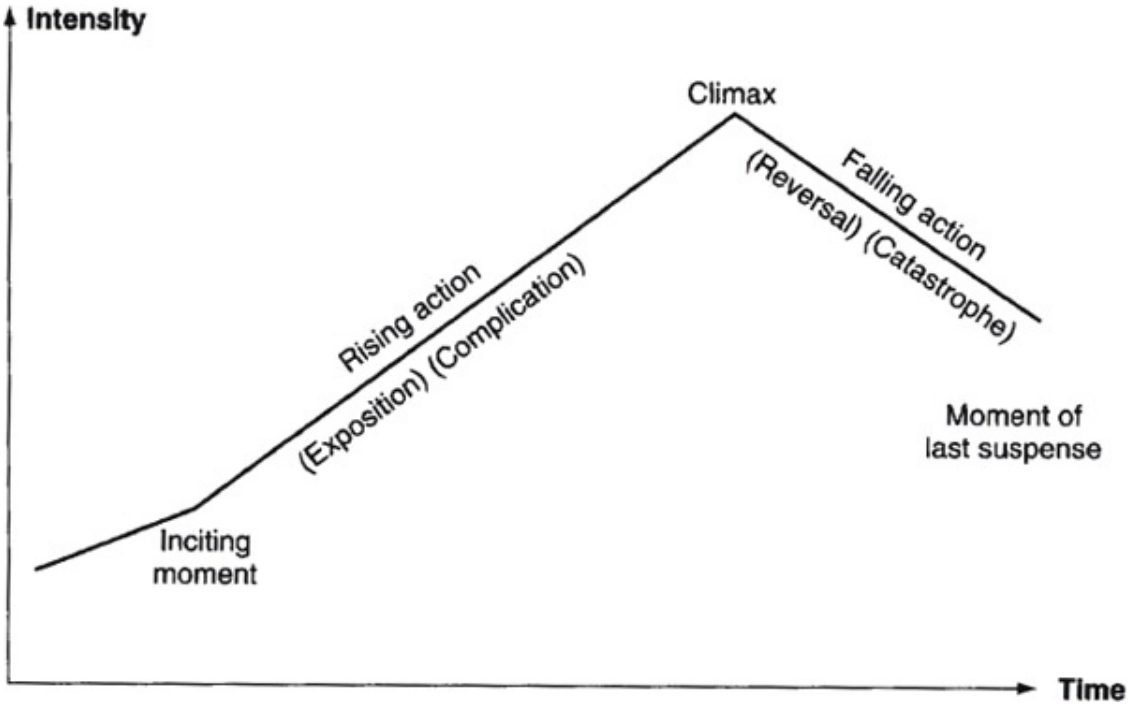


Figure 7–4 Freytag's pyramid.

Complications during the rising action act as obstacles that test the central character's strength, resolve, inventiveness, and other qualities. During this phase, he or she commonly encounters mentors and helpers, and (equally important) hinderers too. Outwitting the latter often permits the central character to grow in confidence and ability. While we watch, we decide what is *at stake* for the central character. Why is she crossing the road at such a dangerous moment? Is she avoiding an awkward social encounter? How much

will it matter to her if she fails? What is "at stake" here?

> *Raising the stakes* is an expression borrowed from gambling. Applied to drama, it refers to the complications that impede a character from realizing his or her goal, and make failure costly. Raise the stakes, and you raise dramatic tension too.

We assess "the stakes" by looking at the person's goals and seeing what obstacles currently stand in their way. When the stakes go up, the obstacles become greater, and success gets more difficult. This makes failure more costly, and so dramatic tension rises.

Joseph Campbell[2] discovered this trajectory to be an archetype lying embedded in folktales the world over, and named it "the hero's journey." In his thesis, the hero often completes his journey by returning to normal life, changed and educated by the mission. Ulysses, for example, eventually returns to Penelope and routs the interloping suitors.

The crisis, then, is the all-important focal point for which the scene exists. Practice spotting them in the drama you watch, and ask yourself how they are positioned and why. In most, the crisis is near the end, but occasionally it comes early, leaving the majority of the scene to expand on the consequences. Imagine someone who has borrowed a friend's house breaking a precious goblet at the beginning of a scene. With his hand bleeding, he must look for a bandage and then summon the courage to phone the bad news. What is this scene's intention? To show how he broke the goblet? No. It is probably to explore the main character's extreme and painful sense of obligation to the lender.

Stories involve multiple events and multiple dramatic units. The resolution of one leads into the setup and inciting moment for the next. Thus, as the narrative goes forward, each dramatic unit is an inhalation and exhalation in the story's breathing pattern.

The storyteller's art seeks to involve us with interesting people dealing with the pressures and stresses of their individual agendas. Their goals may be modest, noble, hopeless, or screamingly funny, but we love to exercise our

judgment on their behalf and have our emotions stretched. Stories, in fact, allow us to rehearse extreme thoughts, actions, emotions, and situations in safety, and to ready ourselves for similar catastrophes.

Which brings us to the issue of credibility in fiction. How freely can you use coincidence and the far-fetched when you know they happen in life? Once, for example, I had a long wait at Newark while changing planes. To kill time I wandered the corridors without my glasses, preferring the featureless blur. "Michael Rabiger!" said a woman's amazed voice, and hastily restoring my glasses, I found in front of me, standing hands on hips, a friend not seen in several years.

> Story *credibility*: whether your story is realism, surrealism, comedy, or tragedy, your audience wants to accept the events as credible, never contrived or out of character.

Could I bring two people together this way in a fiction piece? Probably not, since coincidences look contrived. Thus, an important part of balancing a story is to ensure your audience can believe every action and event. But realism pursued slavishly leads to banality, so your job is to find the balance that convinces us of all incidents' likelihood. The onus changes depending on the type or *genre* of the story. Depending on the special qualities you give the world of your characters, they may be able to fly or predict the future. Developing characters is the subject of the next chapter.

Notes

1 William M. Thayer, *Marvels of the New West* (Norwich, CT: Henry Hill, 1888), p. 238.

2 Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) was an American writer and lecturer widely known for his original work in comparative mythology and comparative religion. His extensive lectures are on YouTube.

8 Developing Characters of Your Own

Dramatists see a person's character, conflicts, and destiny as interrelated. Some conflicts arise from outward circumstances, others from the circumstances generated by his or her inherent nature. Thus spiders climb, and cats stalk birds, but the master of the *Pequod* hunts the great white whale out of obsession with revenge. His *backstory* (prior history) is that Moby Dick took his leg and destroyed his ship, and now Captain Ahab (limping on a prosthesis made of, yes, whalebone) is ready to risk his own life and those of his crew to get revenge.

A *backstory* is a character's formative circumstances prior to the story's present. Backstory details are called *givens*, and each helps to establish the character's history and outlook.

How do we judge character? In everyday life we glance at someone new and employ our life experience to intuitively guess their type, likely nature, motivations, personality, and so on. What really drives them may only emerge slowly over a long association, and even then, can you really say you *know* those closest to you—your parents, say? Mine died decades ago, yet I continue to make little discoveries about them. Those who matter to you have incredible depth and complexity, and take a lifetime to understand.

Develop characters by *establishing* their background, temperament, behavior, and agendas.

You have many aspects at your disposal when creating characters for drama, as you see from the checklist for developing a character in Figure 8–1.

Name	Formal
	Nickname
Roles	Work
	Family
	Friends
Volition and Goals	Now, at the moment?
	Day to day?
	Long-term and implied in life-actions?
	Unconscious aims

	Unconscious aims
Appearance	Age—real and apparent
	Body type and condition
	Clothing preferences, colors, textures
Type	Adjectives or analogies for physical/psychological type
	Active or passive
	Introvert or extrovert
	Social class
Origins	Place of origin and its associations
	Attitude to his/her origins
	Family type, makeup, and beliefs
	Place in the family and how they regarded him/her
	Education (formal and informal) and any mentors
	Parents, guardians, siblings, or other influential figures
	Early traumas that determined his/her direction
Physical Presence	Dominant moods
	Mannerisms
	Effect on others
	Characteristic physical movements
	Most at ease when ___, least at ease when ____
Tastes	Preferred food, drink, or drugs
	Preferred surroundings
	Special interests
	Entertainment
Aversions	Types of people
	Neuroses, phobias, or obsessions
Speech	Voice quality
	Special vocabulary
	Favorite expressions or expletives
Relationships	Important
	Casual
	Sexual
	To self (self-image)
	To authority
	To subordinates, to superiors
Work	Job and attitude to it
	Work preferences
	Any work he/she does unpaid

Resources	Friends and associates
	Major strengths or skills with people
	Adaptability
	Financial
	Beliefs
	Pride in_____
	Belongs to, or can call on____
Flaws and vulnerabilities	Unable or unwilling to adapt to_____
	Bad at____
	Major misperceptions
	Secrets
	Enemies
Strengths	Ones he/she acknowledges
	Ones he/she tries to hide
	As others see them
	As he/she imagines them

Figure 8–1 Checklist for developing a character.

Assignment 8–1: Developing Two Characters

Step 1: Using the Character Development Checklist, make skeletal notes for a two-minute oral presentation for Character A and Character B (four minutes total). One should be a family member well-known to you, but alter any details that would reveal their identity and relationship to you. The other should be an invented character whom you try to make equally credible. Tell nobody which is which, because your audience is going to choose. This is a real test of skills.

Step 2: After your two presentations, *your audience votes on which was the fictional character, which the real.* How many did you convince?

Discussion

- What aspects of character left the deepest impression?
- What details made people see the character with their inner eye?
- Which details seemed to promise most development for the invented character?

Round Characters, Flat Characters, and Archetypes

In literary realism, major characters are usually "round," that is, multidimensional, conflicted, and psychologically complex. Minor characters, having only a limited part to play in the consciousness of the main character, are often flat; that is, they serve the moment but we learn little about them. Because traditional stories preceded the rise of psychological insight, they are almost wholly peopled with flat types. Contemporary moral tales pitting good against evil also commonly have two-dimensional or "flat" characters, each representing a dominant quality (courage, endurance, greed, etc.). They may also represent a type of person (inexperienced youth, wise elder, lost traveler, determined old lady, and so on).

Round and flat characters. The novelist E. M. Forster divided fictional characters into round characters (who are fully realized psychological portraits) and flat characters (who exist to serve a didactic purpose and lack depth).

Archetypes, according to the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, are more than just types of person: each is really a figure representing our ancestral knowledge of human nature.

The literal meaning of "archetype" is "original type," and oldest of all must be the hero, heroine, and monster—as in St. George, the princess, and the dragon getting ready to eat her. St George is the protagonist, and the dragon, the antagonist. Archetypes are more than types, for they often embody the moral forces forever in contention in human life. The dying hero, sleeping princess, scheming villain, lost children, wicked stepmother, and cruel taskmaster often represent cultural assumptions about courage, unprotected innocence, cunning, youthful beauty, impatience, sacrifice, and so on. These values, lodged in our collective identity, turn up so regularly in people's dreams that Carl Jung coined the term "collective unconscious."

Other significant roles include the mentor, guardian, and—more ambiguous and interesting—the shapeshifter, trickster, and shadow. The shapeshifter, for instance, generates suspense by being changeable or unreliable, thus putting

the hero's wariness and initiative to the test. The trickster can be a comic figure or someone malignant who tries to effect the hero's undoing. The shadow epitomizes the demons and other dark, repressed forces that the hero (or heroine, of course) must confront, either in the external world or within themselves.

Archetypal figures or situations are extremely useful to your writing. When you discover one taking shape in one of your stories, read up on it and explore the ramifications it suggests for your work. No storyteller can avoid drawing on influences embedded in our cultural traditions—such as religion, myth, legend, folktale, nursery tale, art, history, psychology, and philosophy. Seeking greater knowledge inevitably brings more ideas and associations to help you extend and develop what your subconscious has initiated. We shall revisit this in "Yielding to Dramatic Conventions" (Chapter 24: Story-Editing Your Outline).

The *point-of-view character* is the one through whose eyes and heart we mainly see, and with whom we often identify. POV, also called *narrative perspective*, can move from character to character, depending on what the storyteller wants the audience to notice and feel.

Point of View (POV) or Narrative Perspective

In any story, it will be important to establish whose point of view (POV) we should mainly experience. In the cat and bird example earlier, three POVs are possible: the cat's, the bird's, and that of the onlooking storyteller. Whose tells the story most engagingly? We love to exchange identities and experience what being the "other" feels like. Whose viewpoint is most dramatic at different junctures of a story? Through artful presentation, the dramatist can lead us through multiple predicaments and multiple, conflicting feelings.

Biographical works often give us their subject's view of him- or herself, and then for contrast juxtapose the perspectives of friends and family. A person's perspective on him- or herself is well informed in some ways, but also full of significant blind spots that friends and acquaintances can often see clearly. A story channeled through a single-minded narrator often becomes that

interesting character, the "unreliable narrator." This can be alarming, poignant, or funny, since it highlights his or her limitations. *Forrest Gump* is a comedy about a mentally handicapped man whose dignified naiveté carries him far into the national spotlight (Figure 8–2).

Switching between multiple viewpoints is common in film because it shows effortlessly how one character affects another, and how we are all interconnected. Watch scenes of high dramatic tension in any of the famous James Dean films, for instance, to see how camera positioning and editing imply different psychological viewpoints.

Figure 8–2 Forrest Gump (1994), an ironic comedy about a handicapped man whose utterances people regard as divine wisdom (frame from the film).

The control over point of view is subtle, and rather difficult for the writer, since it often happens subconsciously with no reliable formula for creating it. The student samples in Chapters 13–21 show how nearly every writer elicits our identification with their characters, who are often flawed and all the more interesting because of it.

Assignment 8–2: Character and Destiny

Write a one-page character portrait of an interesting acquaintance (not a family member) and give three characteristic and revealing actions by this person.

- Guess at this persons long-term agenda (that is, what he or she seems to be trying to get, do, or accomplish in life).
- Speculate what experiences might have influenced these drives.

- Predict where this persons agenda might take them in ten years time.

Assignment 8–3: Volition and Point of View

Think of a memorable event centering on a member of your family, whom you need not identify. Write briefly what you think that person was *trying to get, do, or accomplish* and consider this from these perspectives:

- This person's point of view during their immediate, moment-to-moment circumstances
- Your point of view at the time
- Your knowledge now of their whole life
- Someone elses point of view whose interpretation was probably very different

Discussion

Immediate circumstances often trigger moment-to-moment reactions, but longer-term motivations have deep roots in a persons temperament and history. How much were the events linked to the larger business of your relatives life?

How different were your relatives idea of his or her agenda, your idea of it, and that of the storyteller? How much was what happened in your story the storytellers construct rather than something objectively true? Families are hotbeds of construing, and children often must fly the coop for a chance to become themselves.

Assignment 8–4: Acting on Volition

Without necessarily disclosing your subjects identity, make an oral presentation lasting three minutes or less about an acquaintances participation in a significant event that you witnessed, describing:

- The event, including the action your friend took
- What *incited* your friend to action, and what you think he or she

was trying to get, do, or accomplish at the time
- How this fits in with a larger picture you have formed of your acquaintance's drives in life

9 Analyzing Drama

A *scene*, which may include several dramatic units, is a group of happenings that occur in one place or in one stretch of time. Begin your analysis by amassing information about the characters. What are their *givens* (that is, the reliable information about them embedded in the text)? Like detectives, we consider their appearance, age, gender, dress, role, and social circumstances (see Figure 8–1, "Checklist for Developing a Character"). We pay particular attention to evidence of their agendas as we generate a list of certainties, probabilities, and possibilities. Remember there are short-term drives ("I'm awfully tired and must sit down") and there are pervasive, long-term drives that often go unnoticed by everyone, including the subject.

Don't assume all agendas are psychological. Maslow's hierarchy places physiological needs foremost—for food, shelter, and safety.[1] Only after meeting "deficit needs" does a person begin to think about "being needs"—those for love, esteem, or respect. Last of all come the needs in relation to *self-actualization*, that is, to become wholly and authentically oneself and to fulfill one's potential in the world. For a subsistence farmer whose kids are half-starved, notions of love, respect, or self-actualization remain remote or unimaginable while his family cries in hunger. To ask him whether he has fulfilled his human potential would be laughable.

Plot is the framework within which you organize a story. Plots are useful constructs of events that let you keep dramatic tension high and that can help frame moral or other questions. Any provocative ideas you can develop about your characters' deeper motives will help bring weight to what your stories have to say.

> The *plot* of a narrative is the framework of circumstance within which the characters struggle to realize their objectives. Often while attempting this they must contest rules that are societal or universal.

Incidentally, a nation acting from "national character" behaves much like an individual. It too has a collective culture, environment, and history.

Relating the small to the large, the microcosm to the macrocosm in your interpretations of life, is a sign of sophisticated thinking.

Assignment 9–1: Analyzing "The Fisherman's Wife"

Here is an exercise in separating and defining scenes in a Grimm Brothers' story. So you can decide its divisions, I have reproduced it without paragraph breaks.

Step 1: Either photocopy the story or download it from the website.

Step 2: Cut the scenes apart, creating a new paragraph for each. Give each a functional *tag-line description*. (Example: "Fisherman arrives home to find discontented wife in pretty cottage.")

Step 3: Take your tag lines and draw a fluctuating dramatic arc for the story (using Intensity as the vertical axis, Time as the horizontal as in Figure 7–3 (cat and bird). Then describe

- each character's strengths and weaknesses, and the dramatic problem each faces;
- what produces narrative tension in the story; and
- the story's theme, and what evidence you used to decide it.

The Fisherman's Wife

Once upon a time there was a fisherman who lived happily in a tumbledown cottage. One day he caught a talking flounder. To his surprise it said, "Don't kill me, I am a prince. Put me back in the water." When he told his wife, she asked him why he hadn't asked for a wish. Surely he could have asked for a nice clean cottage to replace their miserable hovel? So the next day, he called up the flounder and reported what his wife wanted. The fish told him to go home. Sure enough, when he got home there was a pretty little cottage. His wife

showed him what a nice place they now had, with a full pantry, ducks, vegetables, and fruit in the garden. The fisherman was sure they could now live very happily, but in a few days his wife found it too small, and sent him out to find the fish again. She wanted to live in a big stone castle, which the fisherman thought absurd. But he did as she asked, and with a heavy heart asked the fish for a castle. Sure enough, when he got home, there was a castle complete with battlements, towers, marble floors, servants, huge platters of food—everything. Quite soon, though, the fisherman's wife was dissatisfied again. Why hadn't he asked for her to become a queen instead of just a fisherman's wife? When he returned to the sea it was dark and dangerous looking. But the flounder reappeared and again granted the unhappy fisherman his wife's wish. Returning he found the castle bigger than ever, and his wife crowned as queen, sitting on a throne encrusted with diamonds and surrounded by ladies in waiting. But the fisherman's wife was soon bored again. She wanted to be an emperor. When the fisherman protested she became angry, so back to the sea he went, this time finding it heaving and black. Even this wish was not enough, for the fisherman's wife next wanted to be pope, and when she had the rich accoutrements of the Vatican the fisherman asked her if she was not at last happy. But she flew into a screaming rage and demanded that she become master of the universe so she could make the sun and moon set and rise. Back at the ocean, the seas were now raging and the sky black. The fisherman had to shriek out for the flounder. "Now what does she want?" asked the fish. And when the fisherman confessed what she had ordered, the flounder said, "She must go back to her old hovel—there you will find her." The fisherman returned home—and they live there together to this very day.

Your graph should reveal fluctuations in the intensity of each scene, indicate the crises, and show how the dramatic units chain together into the larger dramatic arc representing the whole story.

The Dramatic Premise

Considering a work in its entirety means deciding the nature of its *premise*, which is the idea driving its plot. For "The Fisherman's Wife" this is probably, "Some people are never satisfied, no matter what you give them." For *The Wizard of Oz*, the premise might be, "By surviving a strange and frightening world, Dorothy gains friends and learns to value her home."

A work's *premise* is the ruling idea that drives its plot.

Few student writers can tell you their work's premise, and nor can many writers of greater experience. If you can suggest one that is plausible, you will have done your good deed for the day. Finding the premise to your own work, hard though it may be, is hugely satisfying. Immediately you sense its rightness, and go on to see what is otherwise superfluous or detrimental.

A premise normally emerges from the writing process, and not vice versa as you might expect. Quite literally, we write in order to find out what we have to say.

Character-Driven versus Plot-Driven Drama

In a *character-driven* story, the needs of the characters generate the drama's energy, tension, and narrative movement. Charles Dickens was a genius at drawing surreal characters, and *Oliver Twist* (written 1837–1839, Figure 9–1) is full of them. By focusing on the hostile circumstances of an orphaned boy in London, Dickens displaced his own bitter experiences from when his father was imprisoned for debt. Most biographical works feature carefully defined central characters, as you also find in domestic comedy, detective tales, teen comedies, buddy and coming-of-age stories, and many Westerns.

Figure 9–1 In a 1948 film adaptation of Dickens's character-driven *Oliver Twist*, Oliver encounters a range of powerful personalities (frame from the film).

In *plot-driven* drama, the characters contend with the pressures of their circumstances, while in character-driven drama the storyline emerges from the peculiarities, choices, and drives of the characters.

A story with characters driven by strong external pressures is said to be *plot-driven*. Leo, visiting his upper-class friend in L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, falls into a situation beyond his understanding. The daughter of the house and a tenant farmer are having an illicit affair. The couple uses him as their messenger until they are discovered and the farmer kills himself. The adaptation by Harold Pinter made a memorable film. (Figure 9–2).

Action, horror, mystery, and disaster stories are generally plot-driven. Three skiers trying to escape an avalanche would experience such strong circumstances that they can only react, each in their own way, of course, to

their situation. Such characters in plot-driven drama are more likely to be types than fully realized psychological portraits, but no matter whether you emphasize characters or plot, the two are symbiotic and will always influence each other.

Figure 9–2 A boy in *The Go-Between* (1971) who becomes an unwitting accomplice in a doomed love affair (frame from the film).

How would you classify "The Fisherman's Wife"?

Genre

The world of a story, and the forces at work in it, help the reader or viewer decide what *genre*, or category, it belongs in. "Genre" is French for "type," and refers to an artwork's family or group. An action thriller or a buddy story may be concerned with what creates, tests, strengthens, or changes friendship, but each tale will have particular aspects that try to make it unique. Horror, black comedy, melodrama, and Bollywood musicals each have their own characteristic settings, conventions, symbols, and language. As consumers, we usually classify a story first by its genre conventions, but like all rules, they

exist to be bent or broken, so storytellers often modify, combine, or subvert a genre for their own exuberant purposes.

A *genre* is a type or family of stories. Whatever your story signals will make the audience initially categorize it with others of its type.

Figure 9–3 A thriller like *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1965) draws its tension and atmosphere from the *film noir* genre established three decades earlier (frame from the film).

As an author, you choose a particular genre because it summons the world you want your characters to inhabit, or one useful for a particular story. In rite-of-passage stories like *Oliver Twist* and *The Go-Between*, or in a Cold War thriller like *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1965, Figure 9–3), the genre itself helps lay a groundwork of conditions the audience will quickly recognize.

Note

1 Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), psychologist who studied human needs and arranged them in a hierarchy.

10 Understanding Story Structure

Each scene (in literature, theatre, fiction film, or documentary) should contribute a charge of dramatic impetus to the story's momentum. This might be setup information, a gripping mood, complications for the central character to combat, a decisive confrontation between opponents, or the scene's resolution. No scene deserves to exist unless it propels the story forward with something new.

Pedestrian storytelling bores its audience—perhaps with a surfeit of scene-setting information before any action begins. But today's audiences expect a story with movement, so consider dropping us into the middle of the action and releasing items of expository information as they become necessary. A long and rather operatic 19th-century novel like Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* sustains the reader because of an unforgettably terrible act at its beginning. A young laborer, angry at finding no work at a hiring fair, gets drunk and auctions off the wife and child that weigh him down. Awakening from a drunken stupor next morning, Henchard is appalled to realize he sold them to a passing sailor. The novel now jumps eighteen years ahead: Henchard has long sworn off all drink, is now the town's mayor, and his wife and daughter arrive in town destitute.

The energizing question is this: What will he do, what can he possibly do, to atone to his wife and child?

Your handling of time, your choice of good in- and out-points for scenes, and what you include while telling your story all influence its effectiveness. You have great latitude to heighten dramatic tension, mystify your audience, and focus on the feelings and thoughts your story means to deliver. That may mean choosing whether to deal with the pressures leading to a tractor-trailer that crashes into a carload of holiday-makers, or with the consequences—the post-traumatic stress disorder of the lone survivor, say.

How you structure a story affects its point of view and signals your purpose in telling it. Wilkie Collins,[1] inventor of the mystery story, famously advised, "Make them laugh, make them cry, but make them wait." Waiting and wondering piques the readers' interest, and hooks them into the characters

and their situation. And it makes them work to imagine what may happen next—something we story-consumers love to do.

A *subplot* is a breakaway digression in the plot that, like a rivulet, eventually rejoins the mainstream. During a treatment of the Last Supper, a subplot might establish what the nefarious Judas is up to, for instance.

Drama, Destiny, and Point of View

Generally, screen and literary stories lead us to share the major *point-of-view character*'s consciousness. But there is often more than one, and writers become fascinated by the fates their characters draw down upon themselves. A Greek philosopher famously said that "character is fate,"[2] meaning that our inclinations determine our actions, and our actions invite our destiny. You must have seen people—particularly your parents—creating their circumstances over time. It can be funny, admirable, or tragic. Sometimes the person knows his flaws and fights to change them, but this too is part of his character—and only makes him all the more interesting.

In a story in the previous chapter ("The Fisherman's Wife"), we saw events largely through the long-suffering mariner's eyes as he tried in vain to satisfy his ambitious spouse. Did she kill her menfolk by being so demanding, or was he also at fault for uncritically humoring her?

In the following tale, "Little Red Riding Hood," we mostly experience the story from the heroine/victim's viewpoint, but it digresses during the Wolf's journey to the Grandmother's cottage, letting us see his plan to make the young girl into a succulent meal.

Stories with an *omniscient point of view* are told through the viewpoint of a detached storyteller whose God-like eye can go anywhere and see everything. This would serve a story about Napoleon's campaign in Europe well, since it must deal in large patterns of conquest.

The Three-Act Structure

Just as there are three parts to dramatic units in a scene, so you can divide most whole narratives, long or short, into the classic *three-act structure*.

Though this handy division does not cover all drama by any means, it often works well for analyzing a joke or for abstracting the structure of a novel or film. It is easy to understand and helpful when you want to grasp perceived distortions in a narrative's proportions and purpose, whether your own or someone else's. To keep things simple, the story type under discussion has only one main character.

Act I: The Setup

This is the exposition, which means the situation, environment, and what to expect of the world we find ourselves in.

- *What is the story's setting?* A college dormitory, coal-mining community, or Chinese restaurant kitchen each represents a special world, each with its own different rules and conventions.
    - What epoch?
    - What class or kind of society are we in?
    - What pressures does each environment exert on the characters?
- *Who is the major character and what makes them so?*
    - Names, characteristics, and relationships
    - What does each represent? (Human qualities? Different ages or stages of development? Different emotional types, etc.?)
    - What major problem does each face?
    - What is he or she trying to get, do, or accomplish?
    - Who is most important and why?
- *The main character's conflict* is between_____ and _____. (Be careful: you must designate the particular forces in opposition, not something else like a fear or predicament.)
- *The main character's agenda is …*
    - For the story as a whole?
    - For each scene? (Do they stack up logically?)
    - Main obstacles to her agenda are …

Act II: Complications

Once the main character is committed to tackling her main problem, she

encounters obstacles, setbacks, and unexpected difficulties that make her path more complex and testing.

- What adaptations must she make while trying to solve each problem?
- How do her difficulties and impediments change?
- What new factors raise the stakes? (That is, what developments make the main problem harder to solve?)
- Where do all the complications and pressures reach their zenith, so that something must give?

Act III: Confrontation, Crisis, and Resolution

This part detonates the buildup of forces and shows the realignment that follows.

- What makes the opposing forces come into the final, decisive confrontation?
- How is the underlying, driving problem resolved, and which of the opposing forces wins?
- Who learns and grows during the tale, and how?

Divide a story into acts, and you can assess how effectively each group of scenes supports the overall purpose of its particular act. By grouping and functional analysis, you find out what may be missing, misplaced, or redundant. Those who can do this well earn everyone's respect.

Drawing a Dramatic Arc for a Whole Work

Now you can analyze and graph the flow of an entire work. Simply use the same concepts you used to analyze a single scene—setup, complications, crisis, and resolution. Whether you have in hand a film, play, or novel with many characters and dozens of scenes, you can draw an overall arc rating the relative importance of all its scenes. Start by designating the work's major crisis, then examine the rising action leading to it and the falling action that follows. You are not doing different work; only work that is greater in scale and complexity.

Graphing drama reveals flaws like nothing else, and during any analytic discussion it commands great respect. Perhaps you show a friend she has clumped two similar scenes together or put a powerful scene too early,

making consequent material anticlimactic. A subplot may have proliferated and got out of hand, or it is misplaced and impedes the momentum of the action. Point this out and people will value your insight.

Development

We always hope the central character will survive and learn something important, so the final question about any dramatic work is, "Does anyone grow by the end of the tale?" This growth represents the story's *development*, and the character who does so is almost certainly the central character. It can be "positive" and life-affirming growth, or it can be a dark hereafter, as in Flannery O'Connor's astonishing short story "Good Country People." Joy, who is in her thirties and has renamed herself Hulga to annoy her mother, goes for a romantic picnic with a young bible salesman. When he sets out to seduce her, she is daft enough, despite her degree in philosophy, to entrust him with her glasses and artificial leg. In an act of surreal evil, he runs off with the leg, delighted he can add to his collection of prostheses. Hulga's development is left to the reader's imagination, but you can be sure she has learned a bitter lesson about human nature.

Assignment 10–1: Dividing a Story into Three Acts

Below is another traditional story from which I have again eliminated paragraph breaks so you have an open field.

Step 1: Copy the story or download it from the website.

Step 2: Divide it into scenes. Each should be at one location or occupy one stretch of time. Give each a functional tag-title describing place and action.

Step 3: Now group the scenes into acts, using the language of dramaturgy to justify your divisions.

Little Red Riding Hood

Once upon a time there was a pretty little village girl whose mother doted on her. Her Grandmother loved her so much that she made her a

little red hood, one so becoming that people called her Little Red Riding Hood. One day her mother, who had just baked a cake, said, "Go and see how your Grandmother is, for I have been told that she is ill. Take her this nice cake." Little Red Riding Hood set off at once. On her way through the wood to the next village, she met the wily old Wolf. He very much wanted to eat her, but dared not do so because some woodcutters were nearby in the forest. When he asked where she was going, she replied, not knowing it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf, "I am taking this cake my mother made to my Grandmother." The Wolf asked if her Grandmother lived far away, and Little Red Riding Hood pointed out the house in the distance. The Wolf said he would go to see her too, and suggested she take one path and he another, to see who got there first. He set off running with all his might along the shorter road, the little girl continuing on her way by the longer road, amusing herself as she went. The Wolf soon reached the Grandmother's house. When he knocked, the old lady, who was ill in bed, asked who was there. Pretending he was Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf said he had a cake from her mother. The Grandmother gave instructions how to get in, and the Wolf sprang on the poor old lady and ate her up in no time, for he hadn't eaten in three days. Then he lay down in the Grandmother's bed and waited for Little Red Riding Hood. When she knocked, the Wolf disguised his voice and called out, "Who is it?" But his gruff voice frightened Little Red Riding Hood, until she thought, *maybe Grandmother has a bad cold and is hoarse*. So she called out, "Little Red Riding Hood," and said she had brought a cake from her mother. Softening his voice, the Wolf told her how to enter. Little Red Riding Hood did as she was told, and, seeing her enter, the Wolf hid beneath the counterpane. He told her to put the cake down and get up on the bed with him. Little Red Riding Hood undressed, but when she climbed up on the bed she was astonished to see how her Grandmother looked in her nightgown.

"Grandmother dear!" she exclaimed, What big arms you have!"

"The better to embrace you with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big legs you have!"
"The better to run with, my child!"
"Grandmother dear, what big ears you have!"
"The better to hear with, my child!"
"Grandmother dear, what big eyes you have!"
"The better to see with, my child!"
"Grandmother dear, what big teeth you have!"
"The better to eat you with!" And with these words the wicked Wolf leaped upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up.

This is the original Perrault version of the events: other variants offer a less violent ending by making the hunters, one of whom is Riding Hood's woodman father, rush in and save her before cutting off the Wolf's head.

Assignment 10–2: Character Types and Story Meanings

Decide whether the characters in "Little Red Riding Hood" are round or flat, and explain what makes them so.

- Are there archetypes in this story, and if so, who represents what?
- How many meanings can you find conveyed in this children's tale?
- Name and briefly describe a round character in a film or prose work that you know, and say what makes this a round character rather than a flat one.

Notes

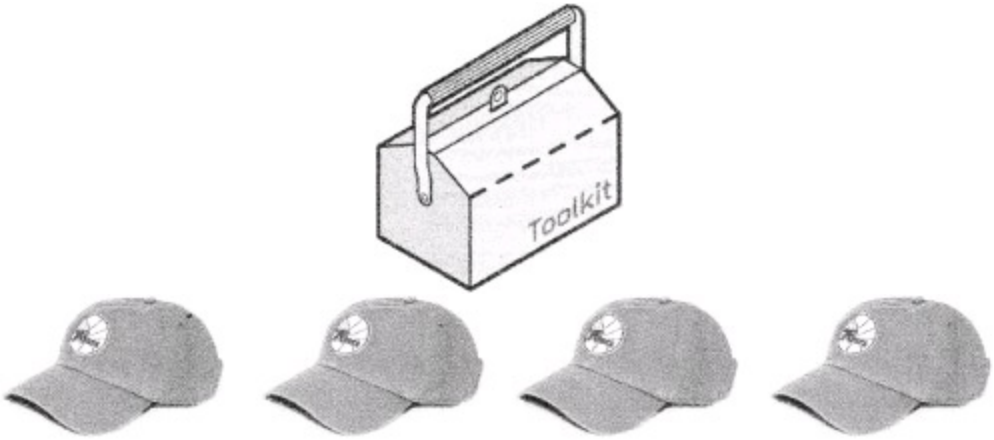
1 Wilkie Collins (1824–1889), friend of Dickens, was best known for *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

2 Heraclitus (c. 540–c. 480 BC).

11 The Tools of Drama

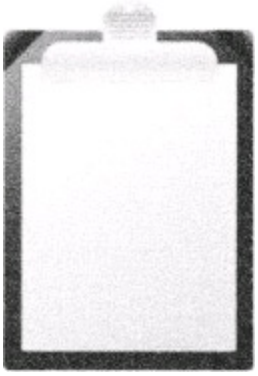
Toolkit

The toolkit items represent a fanciful roundup of the discussion in recent chapters. Here physical objects symbolize the concepts writers use when they set out to impose order and purpose on the unruly outpourings of the human mind. With these, you can dismantle any narrative, examine its makeup and parts, then reassemble it to function more effectively. It's very satisfying.



The four hats are to remind you of the writer's different roles, and the importance of keeping them separate. Wear the *Author's Hat* while you freely generate new material; put on the *Presenter's Hat* to pitch a story; then don the *Audience's Hat* when you absorb a story like any member of the public. Lastly, there's the *Critic's Hat*, worn during feedback and story-editing modes. Decide which to wear, and never wear more than one.

The clipboard represents the importance of interrogating every aspect of a story, especially when establishing the background and volition of its main characters. Because a good story stimulates a stream of questions in your audience's mind, you try to anticipate them in order to sustain the audience's inner dialogue.



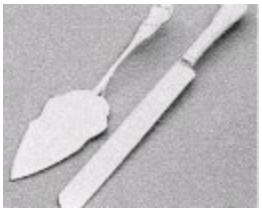
The stopwatch measures the time taken by each part of your story. Time preoccupies the dramatist because drama is best when concise. Less is more.

Diving goggles remind you of how often you must dive below the surface. Your audience, usually unconsciously, will be sensing and identifying *subtexts*—those all-important submerged meanings to which your work eventually alludes.

A pressure meter measures the fluctuating pressures of dramatic conflict. As you might search for electrical power in a building, so you search every dramatic situation for the energizing *conflict* in its major characters.

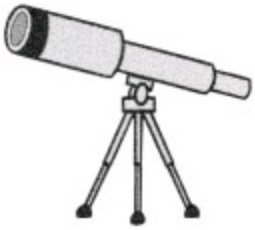
A cake slicer reminds us that drama has many components waiting to be recognized and separated. Finding and repositioning them, each with its own

function and optimal placement, helps to toughen and streamline your story.

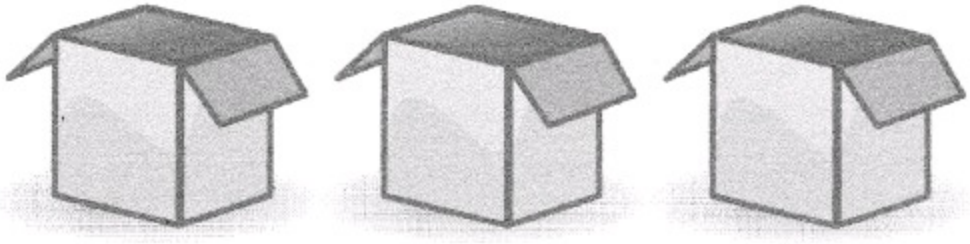


The key unlocks the dramatic premise, the paradigm that crystallizes the story's ruling essence and purpose. Its nature often changes as you write, so have your key at the ready for examination.

A telescope stands for the importance of locating point of view. It may literally be what someone sees, but could also be what they inwardly feel and think—subjective experiencing that art particularly wants us to share.



Three boxes, one for each of the major narrative divisions in the three-act structure. These you populate with the right scenes as you search for the satisfaction of overall balance.



Surveying a Story's Type and Purpose

Now try subjecting your story idea to these brief, blunt proposals:

Genre: The story is a … type of story.
It stays within/subverts its genre because …

Patterns:	Designs or patterns that emerged were …
Characters:	Qualities of the main characters are …
POV:	POV character is mainly … (Say who) Sometimes POV migrates to … (Say who and why)
Conflict and Problem:	Major forces confronting the main characters are … Conflict in this story is between … and …
Development:	Overall change that the story shows is … The development in (character) … signifies …
Plot, and laws of the universe:	Story shows what happens when … (type of character) opposes … (which particular law of society or of the universe).
Impact:	Story intends to act on audience as follows: …
Premise and theme:	The premise in one or two sentences of this story is … and it deals with the theme of …
Meaning:	To me, the underlying meaning of this story is …

Making a Working Hypothesis

We tell stories in order to change hearts and minds, but it takes skill and experiment to evoke strong feelings in an audience. Effective drama must always stir up feelings, since it is feelings, not facts, that change the way people see.

A *working hypothesis* is a simple planning statement that forces you to clarify your narrative intentions, whether the story is fiction or nonfiction.

No matter what narrative you have in mind—fiction or nonfiction, short story or novel, film or play—you will greatly clarify your way ahead by developing a *working hypothesis* (see sidebar definition). I developed this planning device long ago to help documentarians, but it works well for all narrative forms, and will help you structure your topic, beliefs, and intentions like nothing else.

Starting from a conviction you hold dear, it crystallizes your intentions for particular characters in a particular world, and concludes with the feelings

and realizations you aim to arouse in your audience. As such, the working hypothesis is really a *dramatic delivery system.*[1] To make yours, fill in the prompts below, nominating the following:

- The conviction you hold that makes the story worth telling.
- The narrative elements you mean to work with.
- The story's main character—whether human, animal, or societal.
- The main conflict, which is your drama's all-important energy source. Note that this is not a state or a feeling but two active forces pitted against each other.
- How you mean to organize the telling of your story. A criminal trial, a mission of forgiveness, or restoring an old schoolroom clock each involve different human processes. These usually indicate the most appropriate genre and way to tell your story.
- What development, human or otherwise, you expect to chronicle.
- How you mean to affect your audience in heart and mind.

To use this vital tool, simply complete the sentences in the left-hand column:

Complete These Sentences	*Explanations and Examples*
1 In life **I believe** that _____.	What is your life-philosophy driving this story? Examples: "persistence matters more than talent"; "we learn through our mistakes," or "give a dog a bad name …"
2 The **situation/topic** through which I will explore my belief is _____.	What, briefly, are the story's expository "who/what/when/where" details?
3 The **POV** character or characters will be _____.	Through whose point of view and sensibility do we mainly experience the story? What kind of person is he or she?
4 The main	What main opposing forces does the story examine?

	conflict is between _____and _____.	Examples: “between a share-cropper and his worn out tractor”; “between a shy but determined older lady and a brusque handyman”; or “between a formerly untroubled family and a threatening flood.”
5	My story’s **structure** will be determined by _____.	What, organic to the story, can you use to give it an appropriate form? (“a day at the beach”; “flashbacks while describing a traumatic accident”; “rehearsing a magic trick with increasing desperation for an important audience.”)
6	The **development** I hope to show is _____.	Stories need to show a development of some kind or they lack hope. (“I expect to show the refugee emerging from isolation by relating to people using his broken English.”)
7	The **genre** will be _____.	Type of story that the audience will recognize (sitcom, dream, folktale, mystery, rite of passage, etc.).
8	I want my audience to **feel** _____,	Feelings your audience should experience (anger? compassion? sadness? fascination? etc.).
9	… and to **understand** that _____.	Thoughts, realizations, conclusions your audience should reach.

By its very nature, a hypothesis is always a work in progress, not a one-shot deal. So revise it between drafts, and you will stay on top of the profound changes of direction that creep regularly into any evolving work.

Interrogating a Story and the Story Effectiveness Questionnaire

Authoring a story is like giving birth: the experience leaves you drained, confused, and in great need of feedback. What child have I produced? Does it have all its fingers and toes?

Try to read your draft as a first-time audience would. What can you remember about the story afterward? This is the litmus test, because the human memory cheerfully dumps whatever failed to impress.

The Story Effectiveness Questionnaire will help you flush out whatever you currently feel about a story—your own or someone else’s. Make your

responses concise since long, windy answers are usually covers for doubt and indecision.

Story Effectiveness Questionnaire

Characters:	What are the qualities of the main characters and what do we expect of them at the outset? Who is the POV character and is this justified? Does POV change? Should it? Why? What forces confront the main character(s), and why? Which parts of the story could I most easily retell from memory, and which would be harder?
Potential:	Does the story feel complete? Are any scenes superfluous or not functioning up to potential? Are any scenes missing or underbaked?
Genre:	With what genre does the story belong, and does it fulfill expectations? Are there good reasons to depart from the genre?
Meaning and Purpose:	How does the story act—or mean to act—on its audience? What patterns seem significant to the story's meaning?
Development:	Who develops in the story? Could anyone develop more? Comparing the story's end with its beginning, what changes have taken place and what do they signify?
The Story as a Whole:	What is its premise (its content and purpose expressed in one or two pithy sentences)? What is its theme? (What embracing truth does it seek to establish?) What does it say about the individual in relation to the laws of the universe?

Identifying Structural and Other Weaknesses

A story, like a chain, is only as strong as its weakest link, so we are always hunting the weak or the troublesome. Story-editing tools do this and help you find improvements. Sometimes this means modifying the troublemaker, repositioning it, or dropping it. As a reminder, here are the divisions that mainly interest you at this stage:

Scene Components

Setup: Who, what, when, where? What is the main problem?

Complications: Obstacles; difficulties; twists, turns, and adaptations as each character tries to solve their main problem.

Crisis and Resolution: Problem reaches point where character or characters deal with the crisis, for better or for worse. Things probably change.

Dividing a Story by Acts

Act I, Setup: Establishing characters, main situation, main problem, and what pressures or forces the main character faces. Probably also establishes whose POV we will mainly share.

Act II, Complications: Obstacles the characters face, adaptations they make, complications in their paths that drive up the stakes.

Act III, Confrontationand Resolution: The story's major forces come into confrontation at the apex, or crisis. During the resolution we often notice a change or growth in at least one of the characters.

Analyzing a work should assist your instincts, and not be an academic exercise. Always let a story work on you, and listen to what it wants you to do. All artworks, after the pain and difficulty of the initial drafting, begin making their needs known to their creators, and this is when you feel the pulse of creation.

Note

1 Salutations to my longtime colleague Chappelle Freeman for pointing this out.

12 Giving Critical Feedback

Criticism exists not to disparage a work but to identify its real nature, illuminate its inner workings, and suggest how to enhance its potential.

Giving *feedback* is the act of communicating your impressions as an audience to the artwork's begetter.

Giving Feedback

Giving criticism requires tact and respect, especially face to face or in a professional situation, where the author may have years of experience—and layers of prickly defense. To prepare for giving a critique, consider what imprint the work has left on you.

Feedback Elements

Impact: Degree of impact was …
The story left me thinking … and feeling …

Clarity: I could see … but not see …
I could retell … but not …

Potential: The story was/was not complete because …
All/some parts were functioning, as follows …
Strong elements were … and weaker were …

Suggestions: Effective elements of story were … (summarize).
And so the changes/developments I suggest are … (summarize).

Authors often show visible signs of stress while trying to absorb contrary reactions. To soften the experience, you may need to accentuate your subjectivity. A gentle way to proceed is to recapitulate the impressions the story made, point by point. Then you can move cautiously toward synthesizing the values, patterns, and emphases you perceived, and prepare to suggest changes. Authors usually find this progression easier to absorb, and seeing how you arrived at your impressions, become more receptive to suggestions for areas of change.

Assignment 12–1: Impressions and Feedback

For practice you can either use one of your own stories or generate a more impersonal one by playing the CLOSAT game. Using the "Testing an Idea" questions, give an oral review of your own or another person's story, and include constructive ideas for further development.

Assignment 12–2: Communicating Analytic Feedback

This is like Assignment 12–1, but goes further. Read or listen to a colleague's story, then:

- Analyze the characters for their qualities and motives.
- Analyze how the story breaks into scenes and acts.
- Briefly paraphrase the story, accentuating the facets and values that struck you.
- Suggest what, in accordance with what you understand to be the author's intentions, would strengthen the story. To do this:
    - Explain the story's intended meaning as you understand it.
    - Say how effectively it delivers on its intentions.
    - Describe any changes you think would make it more effective.

Part IV

Writing Assignments

The assignments and student writing samples in Chapters 13–21 come from a class I taught at New York University. The samples are useful for illustration and discussion, but are not meant as models for you to emulate. If they look quite polished, it is because I have silently edited the typos and other mistakes that everyone makes during first, rapid drafts.

Most of the student writing makes lively reading, so gather your own responses together before you read my critique. See how you and I agree or differ, because there are no right or wrong reactions. Your response and mine each come from particular lives sensitized by particular experiences. Anyone attentive to the original, however, should be able to reveal and illuminate additional layers below the surface, which is the proper work of the critic.

By the way, please make no unauthorized use of work you find in this book—to make short films, for instance—as it would seriously infringe their authors' rights.

13 Tale from Childhood

This book's purpose is to develop ideation skills, so it asks that you produce outlines, never a polished end product. Such over-attention to detail during the gestation of a narrative idea would only be a distraction.

The book's website (www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger) contains additional assignments that teachers or group coordinators may like to consider as alternatives. These I list with a brief description under "Going Further" at the end of relevant chapters. Depending on the level or special interests of the writers, some may prove very rewarding.

The assignments in this and many other chapters call for bold, even reckless sketch-work, so remember to write in scene-outline form and to stay in author mode. When your critic-self wades in to protect you from imagined ridicule, snuff it out. If you don't, it will kill off the spontaneity you so need for first drafts.

To write in *scene-outline* form:

- Begin a new paragraph for each new scene
- Write in the present tense and third person, eliminating the passive voice wherever possible (see "Active and Passive" in Chapter 6)
- Write in short-story mode using brief, pithy descriptions
- Describe only what the reader or audience should see and hear
- Build atmosphere and mood through visuals and sound effects
- Write no dialogue or author's comments: let behavior and action work on our imagination
- Where a dialogue exchange is unavoidable, briefly summarize its contents ("The brothers argue briefly over who should go first")

Assignment 13–1: An Event from Childhood

Step 1: *Freely describe an event from your childhood still powerful in memory.* If possible, choose one you haven't told anyone

before and whose meaning remains ambiguous. Stay true to what you see with your inner eye, neither imposing on its imagery nor resisting any differences in form you may be tempted to make. Describe any feelings you remember, but don't be surprised if powerful memories are made entirely of images, events, and actions, with no "me" in sight.

Step 2: *Displace your memoir by converting it to the present tense, third person*, otherwise known as *scene-outline* form. Eliminate the passive voice wherever possible.

Step 3: *Write a few lines to say what you think your childhood episode might mean.* Put on your audience/critic hat and consider what you have written with some detachment.

We learn in the cradle to associate stories with the past ("Once upon a time … "), so try to stay in the present tense, third person. To use a past tense signifies that something *has already happened* and is thus closed. The present tense, however, brings events into the here-and-now, and the effect is to open a useful space between the author and the tale. This lets you alter, shape, and evaluate your work without feeling enslaved by the material's origins. Using active-voice syntax whenever possible, rather than the passive voice, will also make your writing more direct and energetic.

Stage plays and screenplays are always in the present tense, and some literary writing is too—for example William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Interestingly, dreams are in the present, which may be why good theatre and cinema often stay in one's memory with dreamlike intensity.

It may be difficult to interpret some experiences from childhood, however clearly you remember them. Be patient and keep trying, because the memory only retains what has a profound resonance. When you finish a draft, let it sit at least overnight before rereading it. Write more drafts before showing it to anyone. Don't be surprised when others discussing your work can see meanings you missed. This is why we need collaborators, critics, and audiences.

The *inner eye* is the cinema in your head that replays the materials of memory in a starkly truthful way. Work hard to record honestly what your inner eye sees, without mediating or cushioning its visions, and you will write strongly.

On Giving Feedback

How a story acts on its audience is always enlightening, so your first reactions as an audience member—whether to a written assignment, pitch, or presentation—can be from a nonspecialist perspective. Tread carefully when commenting on a memoir, because the arrows of youthful experience strike deep and sometimes remain painful. It's usually safe to reconstruct the thoughts and emotions you had as the work unfolded, focusing typically on:

- The work's impact
- How you met and responded to the central characters
- Any scenes you could see with your *inner eye* (see sidebar)
- What the piece left you feeling and thinking
- Opportunities you see for developing its potential

After establishing initial impressions, the group can move to a more analytical and technical discussion. Consider:

- How the central character emerges from the experience (weak, funny, loved, misunderstood, etc.).
- Whether the memory is in frozen moments, or scenes that develop.
- What type of experience the central character undergoes (shock, transformation, revelation, hurt, etc.).
- Whether the story has a crisis, and what makes it so.
- Whether anyone changes. If so, who changes and how?
- Why this story remains so vivid to the storyteller so long afterward.
- Whether any striking images arise from the story, and what their relationship may be to the story's meaning.

If you review more than one story:

- Can you see any common denominators or interesting contrasts between stories?

- What part did action play in the stories, and what part dialogue?
- Which story had the most impact, and why?

Examples

Example 1 (Vilka Tzouras)

A young girl with short hair and skinny legs runs down the school hallway muttering words in a foreign language. She's running around trying to organize for a young boy to show his pipi to the girls. Although no one seems to know what she is saying, they all seem to understand. Finally she manages to round up five to six girls and without much effort convinces the boy to pull down his pants and show his goods.

They're all standing in a semicircle around him. Oohs and aahs as they all inspect the sights. The boy suddenly feels flustered, puts his penis back in, and runs into the hallway, where he starts running around in circles. A minute later he is on the floor screaming. He's just broken his leg. They all run up and look at him without saying a word. Finally, he's taken away by the school nurse, and the girls return to the classroom.

The author writes,

> From my point of view the story is extremely enigmatic but I will attempt to suggest some possible underlying themes: A young woman discovers her gender; curiosity, and what happens when you are too curious for your own good; sexuality—what can be said and what can't (taboos).

Painful early memories often include sensations of guilt, shame, or extreme isolation. Generally their turning points are the mysteriously vicious moments at which the child realizes what is forbidden, what one must *never* do.

For all its outward neutrality, this single-scene story has disturbing overtones. Highly visual, the piece withholds all mention of feelings, which only heightens its tension and horror. Nobody understands the boyish foreign girl, but—looking for acceptance?—she organizes a peepshow for her peers. The experiment aborts when their gullible victim spins into a self-destructive

paroxysm. A whiff of brimstone attaches to the children's sexual curiosity, which results in injury to the obliging boy, and the central character is left in isolation. It is mysterious that divine retribution strikes the boy victim rather than the perpetrators. Knowing they have broken a taboo, the guilty melt away from the crime. The scene is made surreal by unfolding without language or mention of sound until the boy breaks out screaming in pain. This violent awakening is clearly the dramatic crisis of the scene.

Example 2 (Alex Meillier)

Like most of the class, this writer was so gripped by his childhood memory that he overlooked the remainder of the assignment.

> Nine years old. I avoided my weekly baths like the plague. Perhaps I had a near-death experience in the infant swimming program buried somewhere in my subconscious, but I dreaded the bath. My parents would send me upstairs to bathe, and when I was finished my mother would smell me to see if I was clean. Sometimes I would splash water on my hair and come downstairs to try to fool her, but she would smell me and send me back upstairs to finish my bath.
>
> One day I decided to impress my parents. I went into the cupboard under the sink to smell the bottles to find the prettiest smelling product. I found a bottle of Pine Sol, and poured all of it into my bath. I climbed in and washed myself thoroughly. I came downstairs and my mother smelled me. She looked at me perplexed, smelled me again, then yelled across the house for my father.
>
> "Steven, come over here!"
>
> My father rushed over; I was confused. I don't remember what my mother told him, but he grabbed me under my arms, swinging me off the ground, and rushed me back upstairs. I was crying and screaming because I couldn't understand what was going wrong. He brought me up to the bathroom, undressed me hurriedly, ran the shower, and got undressed himself. He grabbed a scouring brush from under the sink and brought me into the shower with him.
>
> He started to scrub my flesh pink and I screamed and screamed. After a while I stopped screaming because the scrubbing was pleasurable. I

remember his penis, big and hairy, right in front of my face, jiggling with the aggressive scrubbing motion. I compared mine to my father's, then I took a pee in the shower and he scolded me, but I just laughed, and then he laughed too. When the shower was over he took out a big towel and dried me off thoroughly.

That night I had a bad dream, and I yelled for my dad instead of my mom. He came into my room. I told him I was scared because the *hemen gemens* that lived in the carpet was climbing into my bed and biting me. He got out a sleeping bag and laid it in the hall right outside of my parents' room. He closed the door to his room and I slept outside of my parents' door feeling safe and loved.

Told in the first person, past tense, the first act sets up what was normal, then shows us a child trying to do something new that touches off a terrifying frenzy in his parents. In the complications of the second act, his mother tosses him away from herself and into the enraged grasp of his father. But in a turnaround moment (or *plot point*) the boy realizes that his "punishment" is actually his father's frantic will to save him.

A *plot point* happens when the story unexpectedly veers off in a new direction. Plot points are powerful because they redirect a story that had appeared predictable. The storyteller's art always tries to maintain tension by keeping us guessing.

When the story direction suddenly changes from transgression and punishment to feverish lifesaving, it turns on its heel, so to speak, and sets off in a significantly new direction. This, in dramatic parlance, is a *plot point*. When credible, plot points are invariably effective. This one I would designate as the story crisis.

During the exorcism, the boy notes his father's sexual likeness to himself, but with a difference in scale. His father overlooks a taboo (urinating in the shower), and the decontamination ritual concludes with the child lovingly enfolded by his father. The third act is at night when, revisited by fears, the boy calls out, and some may designate this as the main story crisis. Because

his father confirms his goodwill by responding tenderly, the boy can rest secure in the knowledge he is cherished. And this of course is the story's resolution.

All good drama poses interesting questions. The boy's problem articulates a fundamental question of childhood: Am I lovable and do my parents love me? In the throes of danger, he urgently needs answers. Will someone save me? Seemingly repudiated or abandoned by his mother, the boy expects angry punishment from his father, but finds he is scared rather than angry. The colossus loves him dearly, and on the second test (calling out at night) his father proves it beyond a doubt.

Notice how Alex learns not from anything anyone says but from what his parents *do*. Unlike words, actions are absolute. They really do speak louder than words—something to remember whenever you long to write an earnest dialogue exchange. The silent cinema was revolutionary because it could only speak through actions and had to develop a new language of visuals and behavior.

Example 3 (Chris Darner)

The morning was damp. It was still dark outside. The house was quiet. A shuffling coming from his parents' room. Clothes. Probably his clothes.

He stumbled out of bed, grabbed a towel, and fell into the shower. The water woke him up a little but he wanted nothing more than to be back in bed, asleep, with today not being what it was, when it was. A rapping on the bathroom door interrupted his shower. He flicked off the shower head halfway to listen for words, the water still hissing in the pipes.

"You almost ready?" His mother's voice, uncomfortable.

"Yeah." He didn't feel like using any more words than he had to.

In the family room sat a black duffel bag that his aunt, an airline attendant, gave him for Christmas. Black with a single white stripe, it sat on the couch, filled with clothes. Clothes folded so perfectly that they made the bag square. Only fourteen years old, he hadn't learned how to fold clothes quite that well, much less pack them so perfectly

into a bag. He thought about how much he loved his mother.

"You ready?"

"Let me put on my socks and shoes."

He wasn't even looking up at her. He was too afraid. Instead, he dropped down onto the couch, next to his black bag, and began to put on his socks and shoes. His socks slipped up his moist feet and ankles. His shoes felt tight when he pulled down on the laces.

He held his stare at the floor while his mother fixed coffee in the kitchen. He glanced out into the backyard and could tell by the colors of the gray brick wall that it was overcast. Dark gray sky. He locked his eyes back down on the floor in front of him. He was cold. His body didn't want to be awake.

He held his stare at the floor. He thought how it must look to his mother. How it must look as though he hated her. He wished he could tell her how much he loved her and how afraid he was. He was so afraid. He was worried to even think about how afraid he was, so he just stared down at the floor, his arms around his stomach to stay warm.

"You hungry? The doctors said you could have some juice if you want, just no food."

"No. I'm fine."

"Well. I'll go warm up the car."

"Okay. I'll just be in here."

His mother walked out to the car with her coffee, leaving the front door open behind her. He felt a coolness and looked out at the granite clouds frozen in the sky. A few minutes later his mother returned and told him the car was ready.

"You got everything?" He looked up at her for the first time since waking up.

"Yeah. All my clothes in here?"

"Yes. I packed your shirts and some shorts but I didn't know what exactly you'd need. I think you'll be wearing a gown most of the time, but we'll see. You ready?"

“Yeah.”

He stood and grabbed his bag and the backpack he laid out the night before. He didn’t want to linger in his house, didn’t want to take a last look at anything, he just wanted to go.

The car ride up was quiet. They took their third car. A big old rust-colored Chevy Malibu Station Wagon. 1973. He remembered the model year because it was the same year he was born. The car radio didn’t work, hadn’t for years. The hum of the engine and the whistling of the heater would have to do.

Halfway to the hospital he pulled a pair of drumsticks from his backpack. He didn’t play, but he told himself they were cheap and would be fun to mess around with. Actually, he didn’t really care whether he could play. If anyone saw them and asked, he could tell them, “I don’t really play, just goof around,” but [he would] say it so that it sounded as if he played but was just modest about it.

He started to tap the drum sticks against the vinyl dashboard. The vinyl was brick red and rock hard from fourteen years of sun. The tapping increased. He was tapping quicker and quicker and eventually he couldn’t get it rolling any faster. So he started tapping harder. He kept tapping, harder and harder. The drum beat quickly fell out of its rhythm and the head of the drumstick in his right hand dug into the dash with a loud crack. He put the drum sticks down into his lap and stared down at the peanut-sized hole in the dash. The car was old and had its share of scratches and dings, but there was something about that little hole he just made. He was ashamed. Ashamed and scared. His mother didn’t say a word. She knew.

For the rest of the ride he just sat, staring out at all the different buildings and cars they passed. Buildings and cars filled with people for whom today was just another day. They entered the hospital lot and pulled into an empty parking spot. Both he and his mother stepped out of the car without saying a word. One of the drumsticks was lying on the floor and the other rolled back under his seat.

“You want your drumsticks?”

"No." He paused, searching for something else to say to her. "Thanks."

This acutely observed story, unwittingly told in the third person, feels less vivid than its predecessors. The past-tense retrospective gives it a closed, encircled, historic feeling. However, its four or five stream-of-consciousness scenes still convey much of the lonely dread a child endures prior to a major test of courage.

The crisis occurs when his mother, instead of punishing him, rewards his stoicism by letting his damage to the poor old Malibu pass without comment. The resolution is that she understands him: the most important person in the world loves him and understands what he's feeling, so Chris can be strong.

This story too deals with the need and necessity for love. Its meaning? Perhaps that courage comes from feeling loved and valued.

Example 4 (Amanda McCormick)

A poor, hungry horse is standing in the backyard in the rain. The mother standing at the window with a ten-month-old baby on her hip considers the horse, and sighs. The horse has to be fed. She reluctantly goes outside and finds something for it to eat.

Finally, her daughter gets out of bed, already surly about something. The mother begins to scold her about her horse, reminding her that she has been forgetting to feed it at all for the last few weeks. The daughter explodes at her, reminding her that her authority, since she is the *stepmother*, is not that of a real mother. Then wait till your father gets home, the mother threatens. The mother tries to draw a line about the care and feeding of the supposedly beloved horse, but is met with even more anger. The daughter storms out to meet some friends at a shopping mall.

Despite the baby's wails, the house is very quiet. The mother looks out at the scraggly horse standing in the rain. She is still angry at her stepdaughter and is not going to wait on this problem a day longer. She bundles up the baby and puts her in a stroller, puts on her own coat, goes outside and leads the horse out of its pen.

The mother, the horse, and the baby start off down the road together.

They pass rows of houses and rows of orange groves. Perplexed motorists honk at the sight for lack of a better reaction, but one man does stop and ask her if she needs some help. She stops briefly and shakes her head, no, and continues on her way in the rain.

When she reaches the stables she is even more determined on her course of action. She offers the horse to them free of charge and they readily agree. The mother and the baby turn back in the rain and begin the trip home.

The writer adds:

I am the baby in this story, so strictly speaking I am too young to remember it. I remember my mother telling it to me over and over when I was young, so I have come to strongly identify with it. I have a strong image of my mother, myself, and the horse on the road, probably partially invented, but nonetheless an image that has shown up in my writing. Another thing that is important to me thematically about this story is the way that so much conflict can be invested in the image of something essentially innocent, like the horse.

Told in correct scene-outline form, and with the requested afterthoughts, this potent and highly understated four-scene piece really belongs with family stories in the next chapter. I included it here because it shows how spontaneously one's memory can empathically appropriate a loved one's experiences. How powerfully we identify with anyone who deeply moves us!

Empathy can transport us into another's being, something important about the human heart that also works through stories. Both the ones we read and ones we tell can deeply move us. "I began writing," said the veteran novelist Anne Tyler, "with the idea that I wanted to know what it would be like to be somebody else, and that's never changed."[1]

In Amanda's story about a struggle between women for ascendency, two powerful images stand out. One is the mother's view, framed significantly by the home window, of the "scraggly" horse standing outside, abandoned and hungry in the rain. The other is the little cavalcade advancing through wet traffic—horse, baby, and implacably angry mother. Here are the makings of a revenge tragedy. Like figures in a Greek drama, the king's new wife must

force the antagonistic princess to accept the authority of her new stepmother.

Through image and action, Act I lays out the inexorable conflicts of stepfamily life. The stepdaughter is acting up—no doubt angry at the girl baby who threatens to displace her—and so she willfully neglects her horse. The locus of her anger is her stepmother who, for the family's very survival, must draw lines between what is acceptable and what is not. Outwardly she does so on behalf of the unfortunate horse—condemned to stand hungry, wet, and neglected. But the stepmother's own future is at stake since the princess will inevitably try to make the father choose when he returns between herself and this new, bogus queen. Act II includes the crisis in which she gives the horse away, and during the resolution in Act III, the mother enforces her determination by taking the two innocents, horse and baby, on a long, wet journey through an uncomprehending world. Usually but not invariably the crisis comes in Act III, but here it comes earlier.

Giving away the unvalued, unloved animal to people who will care for it has an implacable justice. The all-too-imaginable repercussions lie outside the story, just as a picture's composition can suggest what lies beyond the frame (Figure 13–1).

Figure 13–1 Stories sometimes suggest what is going on beyond their framing, as this photo does.

The story lacks a *confrontation* between the two antagonistic women, but this could be developed. With our knowledge of the backstory, we see the mother's act as a justifiable, if rough, form of justice even though everyone loses in the short run. The stepdaughter loses her horse; the horse loses its home; the absent father loses his household (to strife); and the stepmother loses (for the time being) all liking by her stepdaughter. Beyond the story's frame, we know that in the long run the stepmother's life will be hell unless she demands respect by drawing a line. She must forcibly signify that she will neither be abused nor forced out of the nest with her baby. No wonder this story is important in the McCormick family.

Discussion

When you come to discuss your group's stories as a collection, consider the following questions:

- What did they have in common?
- What themes did you detect?
- Did all the writers stay in treatment form (third person, present tense)?
- How did the stories convey their characters' motivations and feelings when you had to infer them?
- How much more about the stories emerged during discussion by their readers? Why can the audience often see more than the writer, and what does this tell you?

Childhood memories commonly preserve those awful moments when you woke up in horror to a demarcation line or taboo that you hadn't known existed. Collectively, the examples above convey the shock and pain by which children learn the ways of the world. In drama as in life, the *crisis* or *turning point* is often catalyzed in a major act by a central character, as when the mother won't tolerate the horse's victimization any longer and resolutely gives it away. From this point everything must *resolve* into a new and changed situation, which we can imagine and do not need to see.

On Memory

Memory preserves only what is freighted with significance. Thus, everyone owns a highly visual and poetic bank of experiences, particularly from early life when one still had so much to learn. In a world of towering, incomprehensible authority structures, we pass through terrible moments of desolation and easily recall those moments of intense fear. At such times, we depend on our family to love and protect us, so we are terrified of losing or alienating them. How to get through this dark forest is the stuff of myth, legend, and folk story. These story forms transform what is harrowing and unavoidable into narratives, ones that metaphorically plumb the very nature of living and suggest how to survive.

In that spirit, three of the tales feature a central character crossing the threshold of the unknown and gaining new knowledge. Story Number 1 is dark because the child is alone, isolated, and responsible for some catastrophe that she cannot understand. By indulging forbidden curiosity and making a bid for popularity, she makes the victim suffer the wrath of the gods. Numbers 2 and 3 are about the solace of love, while Number 4 dramatizes the struggle for power between competing women of different generations, both of whom "own" the father.

The human memory is a storehouse that automatically sifts and reorganizes what it conserves. Long-held memories often involve archetypal figures who are both actual and symbolic. They return in imagery and action rather than in words, and dreams are similar. The dreaming mind will project its most commanding meanings through symbolically loaded objects, images, and action. Anything lacking immediate significance goes into deep storage, remaining as a latent image ready to pop out when needed. Your journal will show how effortlessly the memory pares events down to poetic actions, images, and moments. Art does this too, which means that memory, consciousness, and the artistic process are intimately connected.

Making art means taking what is significant and rearranging it to allow an audience to accompany the author on a psychic journey. The result is a shared stream of consciousness that evokes a journey of the mind and heart.

Note

1 Interview in *Daily Mail* 31 January, 2015.

Going Further

Available at the website www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger are the following additional assignments: **Assignment 13–2: Developing a Childhood Image** and **Assignment 13–3: Developing a Childhood Film or Photo Scene**. Some novels that handle children's subjective consciousness in a masterly way:

Alain-Fournier. *Le Grand Meaulnes*. 1913 (Two teenage French boys, playing hooky from school, stumble during their day's ramble upon a party going on in a wealthy home. The older boy, Meaulnes, falls in love with the daughter of the house, but they are unable for many years to find her again. Told through the younger boy's admiring sensibility).

Atwood, Margaret. *Cat's Eye*. 1988 (Extraordinarily acute account of a painter's girlhood that is particularly good on the treachery in friendships between girls).

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. 1861 (About a lower-class youth in love with a banker's daughter, this novel probes the bitterness of love that fails because parents have manipulated a daughter's feelings. This great novel and its extraordinary psychological insights emerged from Dickens's own four-year period of unsuccessful courtship).

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 1960 (The American classic about the racial and sexual issues of the American deep south, as experienced through the young daughter of the lawyer Atticus Finch while he risks his life fighting in court for a black man's life).

Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Little, Brown and Company, 1991. (Two days in the life of sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield after he has been expelled from school and goes to New York).

Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2000 (Superb memoir of a life in which boyish pleasures had to be snatched from under the eye of an abusive and controlling stepfather. The boy supersedes the tyrant, reunites with his older brother, and eventually wins the fair lady—their unlucky but spirited mother).

14 Family Story

Next we turn to a story passed down in your family, which means tapping into the mainstream of the oral tradition. In fact, Amanda McCormick's story about the woman, the baby, and the unwanted horse from the previous chapter made a good introduction to this chapter's assignment.

Assignment 14–1: A Story Told in Your Family

Step 1: Take an account handed down in your family, one that:

- Can be set anywhere and at any time
- Does not include yourself present at the events
- Is visual and behavioral and would translate well to the screen

Describe the incidents and establish the characters, again using scene-outline form. Writing in this compressed form enables you to get the essence down on paper fast. Then you can present it much as an architect might show a model.

Step 2: Write brief notes on:

- The story's underlying meaning
- Any special narrative problems of which you are aware

All families tell pointed tales that may focus on a family member's distinguishing characteristics, a turning point, a warning, a particular person's destiny, or some other memorable circumstance. Often dating back a generation or two, they also epitomize something about the family's collective sense of identity. Some are funny and paint a trenchant portrait; others convey qualities or values told elliptically in parable form. Frequently they have a dark, sardonic quality that might point at obstinacy in the face of great odds, inherited weaknesses, misplaced ambitions, or some other regrettable character trait against which the listener should be armed.

My mother would tell such a story about my father. During the down-and-out 1930s when they were impoverished newlyweds in London, she was ill in bed and gave her young husband the last of their money to find food in the

street market. He was gone a very long time, and eventually returned not with groceries but with a silver fish-slicer, proud of having bargained it down to an exceptional price. And there, surprisingly, the story just stopped.

I took it to signify how charmingly unworldly my dad had been during the prehistoric days before my birth. Now it yields a more somber meaning—that he neglected her when she was vulnerable, but must always be forgiven. All through my childhood she told odd snippets about his fatherless and hungry life as a Paris street urchin, and about his mother's sentimentality, neglect, and abuse of his emotions.

My mother might equally have told other, equally true stories about his tenacity, pragmatism, and ability to improvise much from little. She might, too, have recounted his professional reputation—for meticulous craftsmanship as a film makeup man, for his charmingly sociable nature, and his insatiable need to be liked by pretty women. Instead, she chose to see him as naïve and boyish. All her stories about him mysteriously ceased before I was out of my teens.

The paradox is that so much gets signified by so little. Family members like to tell stories about each other that entertain and paint the essentials in a few deadly strokes. This is how we frame each other, because whoever can tell a good story gets to control that part of family history. As the picture frame hints at what lies beyond its margins, so too do family tales.

How frequently each story was told, how it changed over the teller's lifetime, and which stories persisted all indicate the hidden agendas, private understandings, loyalties, disappointments, and other flux in the undercurrents of family life. To the sociologist and novelist, each family can become the face of a whole society in miniature, or a microcosm of something much larger.

Discussion

Family stories are the contours of a family's sense of itself. Decide what each has to say about:

- The central character as an individual
- The central character's role in the marriage, family, or society

- What the central character is trying to get, do, or accomplish
- The world in which the characters find themselves
- A philosophy of living or of problem solving
- The surface of the events it portrays and their subtext

Examples

Example 1 (Margaret Harris)

P——, a woman in her fifties, goes with her husband on a trip to Russia in the 1960s. Her husband is a doctor knighted by the queen of England for his advancements in surgical procedures. He is a rather uptight, strict person with a constant need to criticize and control his wife. She on the other hand is an artistic and extremely talkative person who gets strange notions in her head and can't let go of them …

They arrive at the hotel, and because of their wealth, their accommodations are extremely luxuriant. Their room is equipped with a beautiful crystal chandelier that hangs from the ceiling radiating a shimmering rainbow of colors. The satin walls are papered ornately, and the oak floor is covered with an exquisite Persian carpet. P—— is concerned that their room is bugged. Her eyebrows twitch nervously beneath the glow of the chandelier. It makes sense to her because her husband works for the British Foreign Office and the prominence of his position accustoms her to such impositions when they travel abroad. She begins looking around the room. She looks everywhere, and her frantic and capricious manner is unstoppable. No article of furniture is left unturned. Her long groping fingers probe every nook and cranny of the room.

This is disturbing to her husband, and he becomes so upset that he decides to dine without her, as she will *not* leave the room until she has found the bug.

Her search continues to escalate more frantically, as greasy-haired and raincoated KGB officers seem to recite dogma in her ears. Having checked every possibility she finally decides that it is perhaps planted underneath the carpet. To pull the carpet up she has to remove large

pieces of furniture. She does this herself, as she is by no means a small woman, 6 feet tall and weighing a healthy 175 pounds. Panting and exhausted, she discovers a small golden knob in the center of the room. *This* must be it, she thinks! It becomes clear that one can unscrew it. She musters all her strength to unscrew the golden plate that is on the floor.

With a sigh of relief she looks around to see that the KGB men have disappeared. However, a large crash comes from below, as well as screams. This concerns her greatly. She quickly tries to put the room back together and look as if nothing happened. Seconds later the management enters and tells her in broken English that she has unscrewed the chandelier in the room below.

Author's notes on the story's underlying meaning and importance:

My relative P—— was always doing foolish things. This wasn't the only time something went crashing from one floor to another. Once she left the bathtub running and it fell through to the floor below.

Paranoia can lead you to act without thinking.

Her imagination made for great moments in life that at the time must have seemed embarrassing.

Her marriage was so unhappy and controlled that she got out of control in other ways …

Women didn't have careers then, and so were more apt to make up grand schemes.

This was the only way she could get her husband's attention. Even bad attention was better than none.

She married someone like her father, also cold and aloof. This was her way of being defiant.

About themes, the author says,

An artistic personality when crushed will find other ways to create—even scenarios that are not real.

A truly happy person learns to trust, whereas a person who doesn't trust is more apt to be under someone's control.

If you expect someone to act foolishly, they will.

The author's notes need nothing extra from me. Apart from the setup

details, it is practically a one-scene story. I am moved by the loneliness and sadness of the unloved P——, and by the way her unremitting anxiety generates a myopic distraction that only serves to deepen her isolation. She is one of those bittersweet, comedic characters living a "life of quiet desperation." The story successfully blends farce and tragedy, an exceptional combination resulting from a rare and compassionate vision.

Example 2 (Amanda McCormick)

For weeks she has waited to catch a glimpse of him leaving school, shopping at the corner market, or walking home through the center of town. Then the note is passed during the final period of English Composition. Dan B——, the catch of Barstow, wants to go out with her this Friday night.

Trying to convince her strict parents that this would be a good idea is another matter. They insist on meeting this young man before he takes their daughter out.

The big night arrives. She has spent hours primping—and praying that her parents wouldn't ruin this moment by scaring away her new boyfriend. The doorbell—she races to get it. Just as she opens it, the voice of her mother comes up from the basement: "Come down here."

They inch their way down the basement steps and walk into her mother's workshop—for the mother is an avid taxidermist. To the girl's horror she realizes that at this moment her mother is *skinning a mink*.

The boy stammers while the girl registers a look of great embarrassment. Before she can figure out a way to drag the boy out of the door, her mother has charmingly engaged him in conversation. She scrapes and cuts at the skin of the mink as she asks the boy how the baseball team is doing.

The girl stands next to what might be the most attractive boy in the entire junior class, realizing that she may never be asked out again in her entire high school career.

Author's notes on the story's underlying meaning and importance:

This is my mother's story. She always would tell it for great comedic effect, but that concealed what was probably a very painful and

embarrassing memory. In a funny way, it tells the story of her parents who constantly threw up obstacles to her freedom and happiness when she was young. It also expresses how most teenagers view their parents as strange and potentially embarrassing creatures.

If this were a movie, it would be important to convey the backstory that sets it up: what the family was like and whether this incident was a recurring type of event. It might also be difficult to convey what is going through the head of the girl as this scene is happening.

This story sticks in my mind for its central characters' pathos and eccentricity. It is often said that humor and tragedy are closely related, opposite sides of the same ever-turning coin. I find I am attracted to that very powerful comparison.

Told in only three or four scenes, this story has a gruesome central image or *motif*—the dead animal having its beautiful skin torn off. How powerfully and economically it conveys the central character's predicament under the horror-stricken gaze of her beau.

A *motif* is a representation—visual, aural, verbal, or musical—of something important about a character, situation, subtext, or scene. A *leitmotif* is a motif used repeatedly and associated with a dominant theme. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Thomas Hardy uses red and white imagery throughout to signify the relentless violence (red) perpetrated on his pure-spirited heroine (white) by the men who profess to love her.

The skinned mink, implying a comment on the scene's meaning, is a *motif* (see sidebar), a valuable signaling device in place of the further detail that might distract us from registering a central concern of the story.

Film, with its shifting eyelines and close-up framings, is good at suggesting subjective points of view, but Margaret achieves the same in her writing. We see the mink only from the girl's point of view, but we could switch to seeing it from the boy's too. Imagine that we see his eyes dilate as he takes in what the mother is doing; he looks up at the mother's face, looks across to his date. Then, as she improvises charmingly artificial conversation he stares at the

hands cutting and scraping at the bloody animal skin. We imagine him thinking that if he lingers around this weirdo family, he will become their next specimen.

Multiple points of view privilege the audience with POVs other than that of the main or POV character. This evokes the multiple awarenesses that coexist in any populous scene, and projects a richer experience for the audience.

Scenes become richer with tensions and possibility when we sample other points of view. The two teenagers each see the mother, but her awareness of them is also part of the tension for the viewer. We understand that the heroine not only risks losing "the catch of Barstow" but all future dating. This would be all the stronger if the destructive power of school gossip had been *established* during the tale's exposition.

Drama provides *exposition* clues to *establish* whatever is vital for the audience to know about a character, time period, place, or other defining aspect.

For us to infer this, the piece must establish the school's extreme pecking order in its *exposition*. If we fail to suspect that the girl's reputation will be tied to her mother's sickening eccentricities, we lose much of the story's implications.

Exposition, or *setup*, establishes the factual framework necessary for the audience to comprehend the drama. It might include day or night, time period, place, relationships, social class of the protagonists, and so on. Exposition shouldn't draw attention to itself or delay the action, so try to subtly embed it in the action. You never want your audience to feel it is being informed.

In Amanda's mother's day, girls had to wait stoically for Mr. Right to come along and choose them. A motif expressing this—and one organic to the

basement setting—is the spider awaiting a fly—an apt simile for the heroine's predicament. Did you also notice how even the phrase "the catch of Barstow" has taxidermic connotations of hunting and killing? Hints like this will emerge in your own work, and it is no coincidence that your subconscious places them there. This is the story hinting at where it wants you to take it.

Amanda's terse tale uses a range of symbolic and juxtapositional techniques that allude to the medieval myth of the princess in the tower:

- At the beginning, the heroine stalks Dan. In legend, a princess would go out with the hunt so she was likely to see, or be seen by, the choice of her heart, the poor but handsome commoner.
- She wills him to choose her. The gods assist …
- She is imprisoned in a tower, but towers are meant to be breached, and sympathetic handmaidens exist to carry messages.
- Now she must oppose the will of her parents—the king and queen—to see him.
- No self-respecting princess is without a mirror, and here the heroine primps to make herself worthy. All interesting characters have flaws; hers is narcissism.
- When her lover appears, the queen summons him for royal review.

Amanda's story makes a slew of ironic *juxtapositions*: hunter/prey, secret message/English lesson, petitioner/freedom, upper house/ lower dungeon, mother/taxidermist, and mink/girl, mink/boy. Narrative art loves giving us puzzles to solve, tasks we perform mostly at an unconscious level and aided by contextual references—a fairy tale in this case. By integrating the traditional with the modern, Amanda's tale confronts us with elements that make an ironic, eloquent commentary, and alerts us to an ominous *subtext*.

Juxtaposing objects or elements makes us sense the meaning of each in relation to the other. The peace demonstrator putting a flower in a soldier's rifle during a 1960s face-off constructed a brilliant juxtaposition, leading to a thousand sympathetic press stories. Juxtaposing objects, actions, images, sounds, or ideas is at the heart of poetic language because it stimulates the audience into searching for implied meanings.

Juxtaposition in a written narrative is like that in film, formerly called *montage*, French for "assembly" or "showing." Juxtaposition in film editing has been divided into four categories:

Subtexts are the meanings beneath all surface events; they exist in intelligent fiction as they do in life. Scenes of tension often have ambiguous subtexts, ones at extreme variance with surface events.

Structural—advances the stages and logic of a story or scene.

Relational—creates contrast, parallels, or symbolism; for example, a baby crawling juxtaposed against a seal flopping across rocks.

Conflictual—counterpoises opposing forces, such as intercutting shots of Palestinian youths hurling rocks with shots of an advancing Israeli tank.

Elision—helps remove unnecessary time from a process. For example, a field of bright wildflowers in summer, then cut to the same field blanketed in snow, indicating the passage of time.

Juxtaposing events or objects (Figure 14–1) invites the audience to draw conclusions. Stranded fishing boats propped up in a dried up lake bed, for instance, will speak volumes about the futility of a government dam project. Inventive pictorial composition and *blocking* (positioning or moving characters and objects in relation to each other) makes use of comparison and design to intensify our sensitivity to ideas.

Figure 14–1 Juxtaposing objects draws our attention to ironies. Here a car

parked next to a 2,500-year-old Lycian sarcophagus implies that each is the chosen transportation of its day.

By all means use such techniques in your writing, but not in early drafts, or you'll get tangled up creating attractive form when you should be developing the foundations. As you come to reread and redraft, clues will lie in wait to nudge you toward the next stages. Writing is an evolutionary process, never a one-shot test.

Embellishment and the Oral Tradition

A fascinating aspect of family stories is that with each retelling poetic allusions enter by increments. Embellishment is natural to storytelling; it is how stories grow, no matter whether their tellers are single or multiple. Many variations exist from different periods of Arthurian tales, each with their additions and changes as the result of new tellers and new times. Telling something, getting feedback, and improving the next telling are the lifeblood of the oral and theatrical traditions, and central to this book's methods.

Example 3 (Peter Riley)

It is 1965 in New York City, the upper West Side on a rainy afternoon, night approaching. The sidewalk is busy with people making their ways home from work, stopping off for a drink, waiting for a bus. An attractive young woman in her early twenties waits at the corner for the light to change, doing her best to cover her hair from the rain with a newspaper.

A fresh-faced man in his early thirties, hair neatly combed and wearing a simple suit, strolls up beside her, his umbrella aloft and shielding him from the drops. He watches the light change and then notices the girl beside him. He is obviously quite taken with her. The crowd on the corner surges across the intersection as the traffic comes to a halt, but he only stands there and watches her walk away. He suddenly snaps to reality and dashes across the corner after her.

The man catches up with the young woman and politely asks her if she'd like to share his umbrella as far as she's going. She is mildly surprised but grateful, and he seems unthreatening. They stroll down

the sidewalk and chat about the weather, how the days are getting shorter—until finally the woman stops and announces that she's reached her destination. It seems that she's meeting her boyfriend here for an early dinner. He can be seen waiting at a table inside. The young man, disappointed, tells her it was nice meeting her and carries on his way. She watches him go, curious. Then she enters the restaurant and joins her boyfriend.

As they are about to order, they are suddenly interrupted by the young man with the umbrella, who politely asks the young woman for a moment of her time. She steps into the lobby under the watchful eye of her flustered companion, more curious than ever. The young man presents her with a small bouquet of flowers and tells her he absolutely must see her again.

Author's notes on the story's underlying meaning and importance:

As romantic and impossible as it may seem, this is how my parents met.

The story's meaning or importance lies in the chance taken—the fact that a random meeting that could have been only that and nothing more ultimately resulted in a lifetime partnership and a family. Sickening as it may be in our cynical day and age, it is a paean to love at first sight.

This story presents no real narrative or production problems.

This story would seem on the surface to have little relation to my themes, but there is a connection to be found with the theme of the individual in the modern world. In this story two souls who are perhaps intended for one another seem to meet by "chance," surrounded by the gloom of the city and its faceless, uninterested inhabitants. The most human of emotions finds its way in an environment that would seem to stamp it out.

In the commotion of the city, a rain shower threatens the mild young woman's beauty and composure, so the chivalrous young man offers the shelter of his umbrella. This she accepts because, in her coolness and curiosity, she judges him harmless. When he returns she becomes "more curious than before." By presenting her with a "small bouquet of flowers," he shows that he

is stricken and "absolutely must see her again." Who could resist? Improvising like some Gene Kelly singin' in the rain, he proffers his heart. The boyfriend waiting at the table will get nowhere, for all he can offer is dinner.

Character and action descriptions in a scene outline are strongest when you use the compressed, evocative language of poetry. Later, you will have to develop special imagery, action, and behavior to consolidate the values so effortlessly described in words. We know people best from what they do and say.

Note how effectively Peter evokes his main character. He has "neatly combed hair," "strolls," is "fresh faced," and wears a "simple suit." Only a few aptly chosen details establish a most appealing image. Aim for the deft, poetic compression of this in any proposal, outline, or screenplay. Less is always more.

However, when you expand to the full narrative, you will need to translate those key adjectives into active, behavioral equivalencies, ones we shall notice in that busiest of urban settings. Notice what seals the young man's ascendancy: his gallantry in offering his umbrella against the unfriendly weather; thrusting flowers at her as a confession of his vulnerability. These are actions from the repertoire of courtly love. Notice also that the POV character at the beginning is Peter's father, but that it migrates halfway through to his mother.

Younger writers often like to flex muscle with dark and ugly subject matter, so it is refreshing to find this love story tale about Peter's parents. Even grim stories need humor, hope, or flashes of beauty as leavening to the sterner stuff.

Going Further

Available at the website www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger are the following additional projects: **Assignment 14–2: Family Story as Comic Strip** and **Assignment 14–3: The Untold Story**. Books that might be helpful are:

Carmack, Sharon Debartolo. *The Genealogy Sourcebook*. McGraw Hill, 2009

(A good starting guide to genealogy. Tells how to start interviewing and logging the details of your family. Start with the oldest members, one of

whom may already be the unofficial family historian. Be warned, you have started down the trail of an addiction!).

MacEntee, Thomas. *Preserving Your Family's Oral History and Stories*. Amazon, 2013 (Lots of resources and tips. Ways to interview the older generation and preserve their tales).

Stone, Elizabeth. *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us*. Times Books, 1988 (Wide-ranging survey of family stories that "define our sense of the unique nature of our families, and our own places in them" and provide "inspiration, warnings, and cherished values." This compendium sorts family tales into groupings that define the world, the family, or the individual).

15 A Myth, Legend, or Folktale Retold

Myths, legends, and folktales are authorless tales whose intrinsic qualities and messages have made them endure. Indeed, they survive from antiquity because they remain adaptable and still potent for capturing the pressures and choices in contemporary life. They represent cultural assets that any writer can use.

Traditional tales, such as *legends, myths, and folktales* are authorless, orally transmitted traditions. *Legends* are inauthentic history; that is, they use figures and events taken from the past and reshaped to serve contemporary purposes. *Myths*, which often involve the supernatural, represent the often insoluble principles governing the human condition. *Folktales* are usually cautionary narratives designed to pass on the knowledge and attitudes necessary to survival.

On Legends, Myths, and Folktales

A *legend* is history made inauthentic from repeated telling. That is, the tale may treat actual people and events from history, but they have been reshaped to answer the needs of each succeeding generation, indeed each successive storyteller. King Arthur probably existed, but over the centuries, countless troubadours embellished the different stories so that now, over a thousand years later when Arthurian legends have almost no historical verification, they still remain alive and pertinent. This is so because they comment on timeless human qualities such as love, loyalty, honor, faith, humility, and courage—and all the tests that make life an illuminating struggle. As an illustration of their relevance, Bert Olton's *Arthurian Legends on Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000) lists 250 productions that are either about Arthurian legends, or inspired by them.

A *myth* is rather different. It is a tale, often involving the supernatural, dealing with inevitable and insoluble aspects of human experience. Myths illustrate such laws of the universe as, "we must usually take life as we find it." The myth of Narcissus, who drowns while admiring his reflection in a

pool, is an allegory for the perils of self-involvement. Rather than instructing us to respect bodies of water, or restrict our periods of self-admiration, the myth gleefully dramatizes what happens when someone's vanity causes him to overlook danger. Myth, by nature fatalistic and much concerned with transgression or bad judgment, reminds us how the laws of the universe work. Greek mythology is no less than the history of a huge, aberrant, and dysfunctional family (Figure 15–1).

Figure 15–1 Hecate in Greek mythology, the goddess of crossroads, was a triple being who ruled over the earth, sea, and sky.

Fables and folktales are teaching stories whose job is to impart wisdom and survival skills. The best are capable of multitudinous interpretations, but superficially:

- *Hansel and Gretel* is about children surviving the wiles of a murderous stepmother.
- *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* warns of the seductions of charismatic leadership.
- *Robin Hood* is about the morality of bending laws on behalf of the underdog.
- *Rapunzel* deals with the longings of an imprisoned girl tempted by love to join her lover.
- *Beauty and the Beast* is about finding your true love when you're no oil painting.

Assignment 15–1: Adapt a Myth, Legend, or Folktale

Find a myth, legend, or folktale that you can make work in a modern setting and that you find viscerally appealing. If your ethnic background is mixed (and whose isn't?) you may like to research for a legend, folktale, or myth from among the remoter aspects of your background. For me this would mean foraging among Celtic and Hispanic tales before resorting to the familiar ones from my English upbringing.

Step 1: *Make up a presentation portfolio*, which should include:

- A photocopy of the original tale
- A brief summary of its content
- Your new version, written in the usual outline form, which should include,
    - A modern setting whose conventions are appropriate for a present-day story (that is, no magic potions, vanishing genies, or haunted shopping carts)
    - Believable characters, believably motivated
    - A plot easy to accept as credible today

Step 2: *Analyze briefly what your story is trying to convey* about:

- The constants of human behavior

- The way things work in the world

Interpreting Oral Tales

Orally transmitted tales often carry more complex subtexts than the homily assigned them in children's books. For example, the Italian "Doralice" by the 15th-century Giovanni Francesco Straparola is about a king whose dying wife tells him to marry again, but only to a woman whose finger fits her ring. Their daughter proving to have the only finger that fits it, the king wants to marry her.

Dealing with father-daughter incest, the tale makes the princess's husband punish the king for his lasciviousness. Other, similar stories make the daughter submit, since a father in the Middle Ages held ultimate authority in the family.

As poetic allegories, stories often carry multiple meanings, and the wisdom embedded in their subtexts often makes them a challenging proposition for a modern adaptation.

Adaptation Problems

An attractive moral lesson may blind you to problems of adaptation. Many traditional tales hinge on the effects of a magic potion, obedience to some archaic custom, or submission to the will of a tyrannical parent. Transferred wholesale to the present day, your audience may be unable to *suspend disbelief*. In other situations you could employ the convenient properties of magical realism, but the assignment asks for a good story set in a world running under contemporary and familiar rules. So you may have to look hard for the modern embodiment of these situations. Say your tale calls for a self-destructively obedient daughter: Where can this be found? Try a fundamentalist immigrant father, formerly tortured as a political prisoner, now making extreme demands on his family. Should your myth call for a magic potion, you might solve it by making teenagers pop pills at a party, or having an anthropologist sample a shaman's concoction as part of his research. Ingenuity can solve most problems.

Examples

Example 1: The Legend of Pretty Boy Floyd Retold (Michael Hanttula)

A spring night. The wealthy man, P. B. Floyd, driving an expensive sports car, races through the back streets of a suburb to avoid the police car that patrols the main strips. Returning from the shipyard, where he has just completed refinishing the deck of his boat, his tattered jeans and stained shirt desecrate the fine leather seat that they rest on.

Out of the darkness of an alleyway: a blur of spinning red and blue lights angers P. B., and his fist slams against the steering wheel as he pulls his "workday shoe"-covered foot from the accelerator. Pulling over, P. B. begins to prepare the documents that the officer will look for. Reaching for his wallet, P. B. finds an empty pocket and an officer staring down his throat.

He tries to explain, but the officer doesn't trust someone dressed like he is. P. B. is asked to step out of the car—still trying to explain. The officer becomes infuriated with P. B. for attempting to lie his way out of this and calls for backup. P. B. explains that this isn't necessary and the argument heats up. The officer rails at P. B. for insulting his intelligence and barks about his hatred for what criminals like him have done to the city. P. B. continues his attempt to justify himself, but the officer finally replies with a baton blow to the head. Finding himself on the ground and disoriented, P. B. struggles to stop the officer from beating him. The officer does not relent. As the baton meets his stomach, P. B. is able to grab hold, and he holds on for his life.

The officer becomes even more enraged and threatens him with the consequences as he unleashes his service revolver. Without thought of his action, P. B. pulls forcefully on the baton and then strikes it back in the officer's direction, trying to shake it free. The baton snaps back into the officer's face. With a crack into his nose, the officer's cartilage is forced into his brain, and his corpse collapses next to P. B. Sirens are approaching from a mile or so away as P. B. realizes what he has done.

He flees, taking all the money he has with him, into the mountains. Witnesses have described P. B., and he is never able to return to a well-

populated area. A slew of crimes following the officer's murder, as well as a few that occurred before (all without suspects), are assumed to have been the work of the malicious P. B. Floyd, who "murdered an officer without thought when pulled over for a routine traffic violation." Now he is the most feared and hated criminal in the state, held responsible for more crimes than this region has ever known.

P. B. lives in solitude and almost never makes contact with others, let alone commits any crimes. He does, however, donate what money he can to charities he formerly supported when he lived within the good grace of the town. Each time he sends only an unmarked packet filled with bills.

The author writes:

I guess this story speaks of mistaken identity. P. B. is never allowed to return because of the identity the town has given him, so he must leave everything behind and become a hermit—or face conviction and be incarcerated. P. B. is fairly innocent, but witnesses would say that it was he who had attacked the officer. In a police-controlled society, the might of the officer's duty makes what is right: it gives the officer the right to act violently, but not the citizen the right to protect him/herself. Once someone is condemned by the state, the people of that state will also condemn that person, feeling as if that person's actions against the state have been made against them personally as well.

When initially condemned, a person is likely to be accused as an all-around evil person—whether through accusations of other actual crimes (as in the legend of Pretty Boy Floyd) or in having a criminal mind (so that criminal actions equate with an evil mentality). As far as my themes are concerned, I seem to deal with stories of misunderstood characters, or the (re)actions that come from misunderstandings. This seems to be a case of wrongful guilt placed upon P. B. that has sentenced him to a lifetime of solitude.

Backstory is information about the past that the audience gleans as the story proceeds. It concerns events and situations that led the story's

characters into their present situations and attitudes. *Editorializing* is the sin of making backstory and authorial attitudes emerge blatantly, from "planted" dialogue, such as: "Ah, there you are, Alan. And you've just been to visit your father, who bought a share in the mine in 1962."

Every story that you or anyone produces will ask for further development. How to make this happen? In this story, the foreground events need some *backstory* (see the sidebar) to establish local police behavior and the type of people who live in the town. Without this, we will assume Floyd is spoiled and resentful by nature, when really he is the victim of prejudice and ill-treatment.

After the killing, the narrative probably must branch into two stories, told in parallel segments: one follows Floyd in his developing solitude, the other shows town life with other crimes being committed that the townspeople conveniently ascribe to him in his absence. That he always gave anonymously to charities will need establishing early, if the anonymous gifts continued from his hideout are to carry their rightful value by the movie's end.

This story falls under the rubric of "give a dog a bad name," for it illustrates how class or racial stereotyping shackles a person to a self-fulfilling reputation. Because Floyd is good looking and wealthy, the officer's class antagonism is at fault. Floyd must perpetually be on guard, particularly since pride and irritability are his Achilles' heel. Perhaps he is like Rodney King, the Los Angeles African American who failed to stop for a police car and who was beaten unmercifully for it. Like King, Floyd refuses to play the subordinate and pays dearly for his independence. Killing his tormentor leads inexorably to exile and to blame for all locally unsolved crimes.

We might say, "Serves him right," except that in his solitude he still seeks to relieve the suffering of others. Unlike his precursor Robin Hood, his actions go unseen, and the very fact that he does good from obscurity helps redeem him.

Example 2 (Tatsuya Guillermo Ohno)

Southern Japan, a small village. Joshi is a well-known architect and a religious person. He has built numerous churches, all of them in a very traditional style, with a round straight tree placed to support the ceiling

at the center of each church. It symbolizes the strength and unity of each believer. A week after he has finished his latest church, the priest tells Joshi that the central tree has a hole and is infected.

Leaving the tree in that condition would weaken the tree and the church would fall down. Also the other wood in the church could become infected and become weaker and weaker until it too fell apart. Knowing the dangers, Joshi starts a search party who walk into the middle of the forest.

It is very hot and humid, but the party keeps searching for a tree. They sleep in the forest and the search starts early in the morning. Days go by and they still can't find a tree. Every single one they find is infected and full of holes. Everyone is exhausted but still they keep looking. One night after a week of looking, the search is canceled. First thing in the morning everyone packs to go home, but Joshi doesn't give up and goes on searching for the right tree. The forest is very dark. The moon is the only thing he can see. He can hardly see the trees at all.

Just before dawn he decides to go back but as he returns he bumps into a big, big tree. He is amazed by the size of it, at how perfectly round and straight it is. The sun comes up and he sees that there are no holes in it and that it isn't infected. The search party returns to cut the tree down, and with the help of all the villagers the tree is dragged to the village.

The author writes:

The story is about unity. The tree represents unity and is in this case the main support. Although the search was exhausting, the entire party worked hard looking for the tree. Hope encouraged Joshi to go on looking one more time for the tree, so the story is also about hope, which is the last thing we have to lose.

This fairly straightforward story, barely modernized enough to fulfill the assignment, is about faith and persistence. Its hero Joshi, famed for his art and religiousness, is too comfortable with success and has become careless.

Tatsumo's draft could be accused of having an over-evident ("on the nose") moral. Actually, some vital elements are missing, but they are not hard to

find.

Interrogating a story. To test a plot, search it for implausibilities and omissions. This is done well by a sympathetic group, who become the story's first audience. If the author is to learn all that's possible, he or she must listen carefully to the responses and not leap to defend or explain.

You develop an idea by *interrogating* it—that is, by asking all the hard, valid questions that a skeptical audience might pose, and using all your ingenuity to find answers. For instance:

Q: How does the priest come to report the tree's failure to Joshi?

A: Maybe with pain and disbelief, suggesting that the new church is literally rotten at the core and Joshi must rectify the disaster.

Q: How does Joshi react?

A: Perhaps with anger or disbelief until convinced that his work is indeed faulty. It is always useful to make a character's path more difficult, to throw more trouble and tension in his way. This is called "raising the stakes," a gambler's expression signifying you have more at stake to win or lose.

Raising the stakes. Find ways to intensify a character's obstacles, and you make his character "play for higher stakes." This drives him to a higher level of striving.

Q: How does Joshi atone for his mistake?

A: After seeing that he has failed, he must accept that it happened through pride and over-confidence. This allows him to earn a moral epiphany later.

Q: How does he tell the villagers?

A: The priest could offer to tell them on Joshi's behalf, but it would be more powerful if Joshi told them himself. This would start him on the healing path of humility. Certainly it would raise the stakes to make him do so.

Q: How does he get the villagers to follow him into the forest?

A: Perhaps they first make him search alone. When he fails, he must return in humility to ask for their support.

Q: Where is God when Joshi, who thinks he has paid his dues as a worshiper, needs him?

A: God will not let Joshi continue: he must first confront his faults and prove his moral worth. People only become heroes after severe tests.

Genres and Their Subversion

By applying the moral conventions that go with Tatsuya's chosen *genre* of moral journey tale, some developmental possibilities take shape. Recognizing a genre calls up a range of expectations, such as the timing and sequencing of slapstick comedy, the drawn-out tension of the thriller, or the low-key night setups and melancholy of *film noir.* A genre helps you establish the story's world, but it places limits on what you can do. We don't, for instance, expect to see a purple cartoon cat strolling through Galilee in a biblical scene. Though we gravitate toward favorite genres, we still hope your treatment will contain something fresh and unexpected. Film critics wearied by the repetition of cinematic formulae are excellent at genre spotting, and the industry trade paper *Variety* has made ironic pigeonholing into an art form.

A genre (French for type or class) refers to a category of artwork. Romantic comedy, documentary, and film noir are screen genres; blues, hard rock, symphonies, and jazz are genres of music. All genres involve audience expectations that have developed during their history.

Audiences often like treatments that successfully combine or subvert old genres, or that veer off unexpectedly in another direction. This modifies the genre by purposefully subverting it.

Example 3: Sisyphus Cries Dixie: A Modern Story (Michelle Arnove)

On a deserted street just off the center of town in New Orleans, lies a beat up, half-burned-down building. Echoes from the Mardi Gras celebration going on a few blocks away shake the tattered stairs and walls of 13 Stone Hill Street. Three men occupy a room on the tired fourth floor. Two of them stand stiffly next to either side of the door. A large, well-manicured man named Æsopus sits center floor in a large

chair behind a wooden table. Sisyphus, a muscular man in his early twenties enters the room and sits on the end of the table with great confidence.

Æsopus, a formidable father figure to the "crawfish cavalry"—a local money laundering group—explains his family plight to Sisyphus. His daughter Ægina has eloped with Jupiter, a man known as a bad-news gambler about town. Sisyphus, a freelance journalist, is married to Harouka, the daughter of an extremely wealthy Arabian prince. Since Sisyphus belongs to the country club and socializes with many in these circles, Æsopus thinks that Sisyphus might have information on his daughter's whereabouts. He thinks she was taken against her will and offers to compensate Sisyphus in exchange for the facts. Æsopus does not want to go to the local police due to his long-standing judicial differences of opinion over criminal operations. Lacking no wealth, Sisyphus prefers to be given a bottle of vintage wine from Æsopus's infamous wine cellar. Æsopus agrees to this but warns Sisyphus of pitfalls in the situation.

Since entrusting Sisyphus with his fears for his daughter, Sisyphus "must come through or else." "Or else what?" responds Sisyphus. Æsopus will send his main man after him—Pluto, who runs Æsopus's bottle-capping company. A factory down in the lower end of town, the company is a sorry excuse for an encapsulated sweat shop. As it turns out, Pluto's top man, whom they call Death, has been in the hospital due to a golf cart accident with Sisyphus. They had been playing a round of golf, and Death was ahead in his game but fell from the golf cart on the way to the next hole. Word had it that Sisyphus, angry that he might lose, pushed Death from the cart as they were cruising at top speed across the putting green. Death ended up with a broken arm, broken leg, and fractured vertebrae. Pluto is not happy about this incident.

Æsopus makes an agreement with Sisyphus that if he does not capture Jupiter and Ægina and bring them back to good ole' New Orleans, Sisyphus will have to go to work for Æsopus under Pluto. The

deal is on … until time runs out. Sisyphus tells his wife of the arrangement he made with Æsopus. He asks her to contact her father to help him out. Disgusted with Sisyphus's continuous trouble-making schemes, the wife runs away with Pluto's cousin, Erilias.

Sisyphus fails and has no choice but to go to work for Æsopus under Pluto's command. After a week at the factory in the posh back offices, Sisyphus cons Pluto into letting him off for a few days to find his wife and Erilias. He heads for the country club first, and finds himself engaged in a round of golf three hours later. His friends, happy to see him, drag him out first to dinner and later to a dance club. One of his friends, Olympus, offers him a job as caretaker on his private island and offers keys to the estate and all its treasures. Sisyphus, without hesitation, snatches the opportunity.

Three years later, as he lounges on the empty beach, a yacht bearing Æsopus and Pluto arrives nearby. At gunpoint, they take Sisyphus back to the States.

The factory, now more run-down than ever, continues to manufacture bottles and caps. Sisyphus is demoted from his previous posh position under Pluto to low man on the bottle-capping assembly line. Here the bottles never stop lining up and the bins of caps runneth over.

Every evening, Sisyphus is taken to a dorm-style room and is watched over by Pluto's security guards. This is his destiny … to be forevermore a bottle capper.

The author writes:

As I could never come close to the original magical *Myth of Sisyphus*, understanding Camus's reflective comment on how human beings are the masters of their own fate is somewhat complex. However, I will give it a try.

The original myth points to a number of notions about humankind and destiny. First, I would say that Camus is trying to point out that we are responsible for our own actions and bring about our own destiny through indirect self-deprecating actions. In other words, sometimes we

take for granted what we have and then must test the truth of its existence, losing in the process. Sisyphus had all that he needed, but was tempted with more. When he tested his possessions, he lost all that he enjoyed. Given an opportunity for redemption, he once again tested his ownership of his goods and ended up far worse off.

The other defining point of the myth is the notion of repetition and counter-progression as a living hell. Maybe my own beliefs in variety, growth, and progression as the primary needs for happiness in life leave me with the feeling that destitution and "hell," as we'd have it, is doing the same thing, day in and day out, with no satisfactory outcome. To spend one's life doing meaningless, menial, laborious activities and never seeing any change or growth, either in oneself or the objects of one's focus, equates to nothingness, especially when one's life is ruled by another person and choices are not elements in the equation.

The setting—Mafiosi in a run-down New Orleans backwater—is replete with atmospheric possibility. It is a world in which women and younger males are property, and the godfather deals out assignments that may garner promotion or punishment.

I wish the author had used modern names, as the ancient ones get in the way of accepting the story as modern. However, we do have a good beginning, and in Sisyphus wearily capping bottles for eternity, a memorable ending too. Instead of the mythical figure repeatedly rolling his rock uphill, Michelle's hero is condemned to everlasting factory labor as punishment for his over-confidence and inattention.

Since this will be his fate, it would be interesting to place him, when he begins as a carefree young journalist, in the sight of something that *foreshadows* his destiny, such as a fly struggling in a spider web. Sisyphus is the hero, so we expect him to win, but myths like to turn our expectation on its head. Making him fail focuses our attention on the faults and omissions that clinch his destiny.

Foreshadowing—literally the shadow that falls ahead of us when we walk away from the sun—is a narrative device that lets the audience (and

sometimes the character, if perceptive) glimpse a portent of what will happen in the future.

The outline has a couple of non sequiturs. Why does Sisyphus fail to find Ægina? How does Æsopus's wife become pivotal to Sisyphus's failure? In the original myth, Zeus has Æsopus's daughter plucked away by an eagle. Sisyphus happens to see the abduction and snitches on Zeus, who exacts revenge by consigning Sisyphus to eternal punishment. For the next draft, the chain of causality would need mending.

Discussion

The adaptations—of an American legend, a Japanese folktale, and a Greek myth—deal with characters whose innate qualities shape their fates. Floyd, though outlawed, holds on to his humanity but not much else; Joshi triumphs after truly signifying humility; while Sisyphus messes up and finds himself trapped in dehumanizing toil. The notion that we make our own path through life is a very old one, expressed by Heraclitus as "character is destiny." Do your tales connect character and fate in this way?

Michael Roemer, whose *Telling Stories* is cited at the end of this chapter, believes that a story's plot represents the laws of the universe at work, and that the characters who most often catch our imagination are those who challenge those laws in order to fulfill their desires and ambitions. Civilization depends on people who act for good, so we care deeply about what makes people tick, what actions they take to earn good or bad fortune, and what determines the justice they receive. Two of our characters merely survive, because they make bad judgments, overestimate their abilities, or otherwise fail to adapt to reality. One (Joshi) sees reality but refuses to accept that God can really want him defeated, and obstinately continues his search. God's message—to the villagers and to us—is that he rewards faith and persistence.

The Hero's Journey: the folklorist Joseph Campbell identified narrative tropes common to many of the world's folktales. Hollywood covered similar ground by correlating film types, audiences, and box office receipts. What Campbell saw was male dominated, but heroines make

journeys through life too.

I find it fascinating that all three authors tell stories that enact what the folklorist Joseph Campbell believed was a universal structure, which he called the hero's journey. In his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* he asserts that:

- We first meet the hero (or heroine, of course) in a world familiar to them.
- He receives a call to action involving a mission.
- Often he first refuses the call.
- The call is repeated more urgently.
- Reluctantly accepting the challenge, the hero passes into a new and unfamiliar world.
- Along the path, he/she faces increasingly severe tests of courage, ingenuity, persistence, faith, and so on.
- Along the way he meets both helpers and hinderers—allies, counselors, tricksters, and enemies—some helping, others making matters more complex and difficult for the hero to solve.
- There is usually a mentor from whom to learn.
- Approaching the ultimate problem, he (or she, of course) faces the supreme test.
- Passing it leads to the supreme reward.
- Tested and strengthened, he returns to the normal world bearing the elixir of wisdom.

Campbell's limitation is that he sees hardly any heroines. The heroic journey will be familiar from Peter Jackson's epic Tolkien trilogy, the Harry Potter films, or any Disney feature. Early Hollywood box-office returns showed what strength and durability lay in traditional forms and characters. The medieval troubadours and roving theatre companies of earlier centuries must have made similar discoveries.

Going Further

The Internet is a rich source of fairy tales and other traditional stories. By entering a title plus two or three key words into a search engine, you can locate any number of fascinating interpretations for each.

Caution: use the books in the list below to assist you in rethinking

something you have already written, not as a starting point for a new idea. You would risk paralysis from trying to write within too elaborate and constricting a plan.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* 1973 (The classic cross-cultural study examining the archetypal hero in light of modern psychological ideas. Using fairytale narratives of many cultures, Campbell discusses the three stages of the heroic journey—departure, initiation, and return—and a lot more besides. There are many other publications by and about Campbell).

Roemer, Michael. *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative.* 1995 (Roemer is a filmmaker and film teacher with a background in philosophy. His book is a radical, passionate, and highly literate exposition of the ancient roots of storytelling, and a defense of them against the depredations of Deconstructivist theory).

Vogler, Christopher and Michele Montez. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, 3rd ed., 2007 (This work is deeply indebted to Joseph Campbell's work and shows how closely the folklorist's paradigm fits Dorothy's career in *The Wizard of Oz* as well as those of hundreds of other screen heroes and heroines).

16 Dream Story

The work in this chapter invites you to break with a major writing enemy—over-control. Of course, no writing can happen without *some* control, but as we have said, some of the writing rules instilled by misguided educators kill all pleasure in writing.

Writing is a two-part process. Generate new material fast and intuitively so you can set down your mind's inventions. Call on your powers of analysis and restructuring later when you edit. Never wear two hats at once; it overheats the brain, leads to self-censorship, and knocks you flat with writer's block.

Assignment 16–1: Writing a Dream

Use the material from the journal of dreams you have been keeping and, most importantly, preserve its zany logic in your writing.

Step 1: *Use a dream or dreams to write a treatment for a story that might last, say, five minutes of screen time.* Do not worry about a tidy beginning or ending, or about conventional story logic. Instead, be true to the mood and jagged logic of dream itself. To be true to its spirit, feel free to alter, augment, or splice incidents together.

Step 2: *Separately define themes or messages* the story seems to be developing.

Write somewhere secluded so you set down whatever comes into your head. Normally our minds only move in complete freedom when asleep and dreaming, so this chapter aims to explore what one can create when awake and not too hobbled by self-censorship.

If you record your dreams over a period of months or years, your thematic preoccupations will emerge—along with your demons, archetypes, and unfinished business in life. What more could a storyteller ask?

Being true to the distinctive logic of dream is a rehearsal for accepting how things happen in life. Evict all the clichés in your mind by celebrating the sheer oddity of the real, as the Dada and Surrealist movements did early in the 20th century.

Your dream journal will probably echo principles important to anyone working in the arts, namely:

- Emotionally loaded dream narrative is open, sparse, visual, and nonliteral
- An open story invites the audience to decompress what the narrative withholds
- Vital elements often arrive in nonlinear juxtaposition
- Putting tension and tone ahead of logic reflects how we experience pressured situations
- Dreams and poetry require an effort that makes us remember their meanings
- Lengthy dialogue devalues words, but brief verbal exchanges during a flow of physical action raises the value of language

Withholding information means delaying answers to your audience's questions, postponing closure, and thus maintaining tension. Profound messages seldom take shape easily, but we never forget what took hard work to acquire.

Discussion

Dreams are often very cinematic and rich with structural and symbolic possibilities. Surrealist art of the 1920s and 1930s, influenced by advances in psychology, made use of the idea that the subconscious mind uses dreams to express subconscious preoccupations as myth, symbol, and metaphor.

Dreams offer an interpretation of the chaotic, surreal experience we call waking life. They do it poetically by using story, symbol, and metaphor.

When you come to discuss the dream assignments, ask the following questions:

- What is the dream's structure, and does it have a crisis?
- Is there a myth or folktale similar in form?
- What gives the principal characters their centrality?
- Are the characters flat or round, and what do they represent?
- Has the writer implied a meaning, and do you agree with it?
- What are the most daring and dreamlike aspects of the work?

Examples

Dream Sequence 1 (Chris Darner)

An average-looking man in unassuming clothing is led along a path, carved into a sheer sea cliff. In front of him a short, crooked man keeps up a brisk pace. The average man slows and sputters in his walk, staring out at the vastness of everything around him. Below the two travelers is a deep-green ocean, its waves crashing up far below them, a salty white mist rising into the air. The two continue on the narrow trail, the crooked man constantly pulling and tugging at the average man. The path bends up ahead and the crooked man pulls more eagerly than ever, increasing the pace to a near jog.

As the path curves around the cliff, land comes into view—lush tropical vegetation and a white-sand beach. The average man scans the new view and his pace slows. The crooked man doesn't notice, however, and continues on his brisk pace, leaving the average man slowly drifting farther behind. The average man continues his scanning, stumbling along the trail. His eyes catch a small raft floating down below in the sea.

He holds up his hand to shade his eyes and help him focus in the bright light. Slowly the image comes into focus. There are two brothers frolicking in the water. They both look very similar and could very likely be twins. They have plain, muted features, appear to be about 25 years old and are extremely obese. Wearing nothing but small bathing suits, their bodies resemble white walruses, their flesh rippling with

every movement. The average man can hear faint echoes of their laughing and giggling mixed with the sounds of the crashing waves still below him. The two brothers chuckle and chortle, playing in and around the raft. They take turns pulling their massive frames up into their small boat and then falling back off the side of the raft, which folds and stresses under their weight. The average man sits there stunned, his movement along the path having halted seconds into the observation.

The crooked man returns and curtly pulls at the average man, though not out of spite. The average man stumbles along the path, once again following the crooked man. He glances back one last time, hears the twins playing on the raft, then twists around to follow the crooked man, who is leading as eagerly as ever.

The author writes:

This dream sequence seems to develop upon a theme outside my current theme list but does touch upon one. The main theme of the piece is alienation and being somewhere intimidating and foreign. The crooked man pulls the average man along because he is either unable to maneuver in the unfamiliar territory or is hesitant. When the average man sees the brothers he stops and watches them. While I didn't write in his internal reactions to the situation, they hopefully read as uncomfortable, and that he somehow feels it is indecent. This response, and anywhere you are uncomfortable with people around you, does touch partially on my theme of fear of either being or becoming that which you hate. In other words, the average man sees something in the brothers that he sees, or could see, in himself.

My themes have been finding their way into my writings, both inside of class and out, fairly consistently. One theme that I do notice in my writings is alienation and a feeling of being somewhere forbidden or taboo. This dream sequence illustrates that fairly well.

Although imagery is only minimally rendered, the visual texture of this dream is stark and vivid. Of the four characters, three are physically deformed. The crooked man is the average man's guide, a sort of stunted

Father Time, bustling their journey forward. There is an implied polarity between the ends and the means, because the old man is wholly focused on the purpose of the journey, while the average man wants to linger and gaze around him. As he takes in the natural and beautifully evoked seascape, his gaze is captured by the two fat, white walrus boys. Their play is repulsively fascinating, and he goes on watching voyeuristically until chivvied by his guide. These twin souls are a phenomenon that he feels he must not dwell on, yet he cannot help looking back at them over his shoulder as the crooked man tugs him forward. From the author's notes, the average man seems to be witnessing his own worst fate—pale obesity with only another version of himself for companionship.

Dream Sequence 2 (Michael Hanttula)

An immaculately clear sky, radiant blue. Tall grass that has been worn to a light brown by the beaming sun sways playfully in the cool breeze. A trail stretches far across this land, snuggled between a long body of water and rolling hills. It is absolutely quiet, except for the grasses, which seem to snicker as they rub against each other. There is a group of young men hiking along this mountainous trail. The sun is beating down on them, browning them like the grass, and the calm expanse of the dark lake beckons them to divert their path. They pause and contemplate a swim when their attention is stolen by a curious crack in an enormous boulder behind them.

One of the men investigates the crack, which is formed by a large stone plate that seems to be slowly dismembering itself from the larger portion of rock. Behind this plate, the man finds a small opening that leads inside the boulder. The rest of the group, increasingly curious, join the young man.

They cautiously creep inside this enormous rock to find a stone-walled room with an abundance of ceiling height for what it lacks in floor space. It could have been an antechamber to a medium-sized pyramid. There is a large stone statue of an indiscernible figure standing before them, draped in a dark gray and black linen; it watches them, it watches who enters. A dark tunnel streams off to the right; it is

not very inviting. They find the lengthy doorway-like hole to the left of the figure much more appealing.

Character archetypes, symbolic and primal as Tarot cards, often appear in dreams. Are they hardwired in our genetics or instilled by our culture? *Narrative archetypes* seem equally inherent. How else could dreams, mostly so fragmentary and random, sometimes be so true to narrative tradition?

In a bit of a nervous fright over a possible forthcoming adventure, they scurry through the length of the "doorway." Three enormous stone slabs slam down behind them—meant to trap them individually. Now in a new room, they find a large pit taking up a good area of the floor before them. Its depth is unknown, for it beams an intense light upward. The high ceiling is surprisingly dark given the intensity of the light. Returning from the heights of the ceiling down the length of the near wall are three gigantic stained-glass windows with gothic arches and no particular design, yet apparently medieval. On the ground, the group discovers a plenitude of odd-shaped stones. Some resemble religious objects—crosses and ankhs. The friends decide that they have had enough of this adventure and pick up the stones to beat out the stained glass windows. One of the windows "pops" out of its molding and slips outward. The ground below is now a few hundred feet down. Looking out of this new portal, they see old-growth redwoods that have grown past the height of their view. This exit is not an option.

Turning back toward the room, they see a small ledge on one side of the gleaming crater. They shimmy their way across to the other side, fearful of plummeting to its possible depths. As they reach the other side, they are met by a small cliff (of about three feet or so) that is topped with a fairly severe incline. The only way out seems farther within. They attempt to climb this subterranean hill but find that its composition is of such loose dirt that their arms are buried to the shoulders by the time they can manage a grip. Just as it seems

impossible, one of the group discovers another way out, a passage to the right side. They hurry through the tunnel and find themselves landing on the edge of a pool.

A white-bottomed pool with bright lights illuminating it, one you might find in a suburban residence, yet underground. Floating in the pool are dozens of severed human appendages, mostly full arms and legs. Yet the pool's water is clear. One of the boys jumps in and swims safely to the other side. Following his lead, the others jump in. Just as they do, a large dragon's head that the boys hadn't seen before emerges from a far side of this medium-sized pool. It's red with fiery eyes, made from durable plastic. One may have seen its like at an amusement park. Opening its mouth to toast the group with flames, it coats the clustering youths with a fine watery spray. They hop out of the pool, happy to be alive and beaming with adrenaline.

The room continues on one side, apparently naturally formed pillars leading off into the darkness. However, on the other side is the tunnel they had seen before in the antechamber. They rush through it, laughing at the statue as they make their way out the boulder's entrance. Enraged by their lack of respect, the statue transforms into a human, shielded by a box over her head, and chases them away.

The author writes:

It's rather difficult to find any overwhelming themes or direct purpose to this dream, but it does seem to deal with adventure, religion, mortality, and the bond between friends. Odd, because this was a recurring dream that I once had with each new set of friends, and have not had since the last time that I had a unified "group" of friends.

It seems as if my interests, thematically speaking, have been expanded to also include the loss of innocence, alienation, and the conflict of wanting to "do good" in a corrupt environment.

This dream was delivered as one enormous, formless paragraph, so I took the liberty of inserting paragraph breaks. These make it easier to read and understand because they highlight important transitions between stages. Make no mistake, this astonishing dream is a textbook example of the hero's

journey and many of its symbols. So often dreams are fragmentary and illogical, but close analysis of this one shows a strong structure. Consider:

Act I

- The sunburned young gods amid the trail/sun/water/hills of normal life.
- The call to adventure in the cracked rock with its passageway leading into the hill.
- The first chamber guarded by the draped stone figure. The Problem is to get past the gatekeepers and penetrate to the heart of the catacomb.

Act II

- A one-way passage leading to the second chamber containing religious symbols/church windows/blinding light from (hell?) below.
- From here, there are at first two blocked routes of escape.
- But a third way leads to the third and inmost cavern.
- Escape from the inner cave is only possible via the supreme test—passing through the pool of severed limbs.

Act III

- Finally they must run the gauntlet of the statue that comes to life, an enraged maternal female that chases them blindfold, like the figure of Justice.
- For the band of friends, their lightly undertaken journey into the hill, with its three caverns, and the return, proves to be a supreme test of endurance, courage, and collaborative problem solving. Facing the terror and mysteries of the journey, but emerging unharmed through cooperation and ingenuity, they seem to prove the value of teamwork.

More than a stock hero's journey, this is a collective or even generational rite of passage into manhood. Michael reports reexperiencing this dream with each new group he has joined, as though his mind wants to calm his insecurities (or warn him?) by repeating the tale. Other elements in the dream, such as the veiled female guardian and the pool of severed limbs, suggest preoccupations that only he can decipher.

Dream Sequence 3 (Cynthia Merwarth)

Her arms are full of the day's worth of shopping. As she walks up to the

mall exit the guard unlocks the door and lets her out. Time must have flown by because the mall seemed full to her when she was in the stores. But now the parking lot is strangely deserted—all except for her car, which looks as though it is miles away (farther than she remembered having parked it).

It is dark, and the car park lights illuminate the barrenness. As she walks to her car she hears the sound of growling. Turning, she sees a pack of wild dogs coming for her at a rapid pace. The car seems so far away, but she runs quickly. The growling sounds are closer, louder, more imminent. She runs forever, always hearing the sounds of the dogs behind her. She fumbles with her keys—that particular sound seems so loud and long. The car door flies open and she tries to get in, but as she is shutting the door a dog rips at her heel, making her scream in pain. She kicks it away and slams the door shut.

Now the pack of dogs howls and encircles the car in a predatory rhythmic dance—as if they were going around a fire. Time stands still as she honks the horn again and again, trying to rouse some sign of life in the empty lot.

She is now driving and the dogs are running behind her, never losing sight of her. She can see them in the rearview mirror. The road is dirt. It is deserted. She comes to a gas station and runs out of her car looking for help.

As she runs up to the station attendant he swipes at her with his hand and tells her to "get out of here." He gestures to hit her and stomps his feet at her. She backs off, not believing his refusal to listen to what she has just been through. She is trying to tell him as fast as possible and all he is doing is running from her and trying to hit her. As she runs past an aluminum wall of the building—following the attendant—she catches a glimpse of a wild dog near her. She freezes with terror. The dog is sitting and proceeds to tell her that the man will not help her … that the man cannot understand her.

Why can she understand the dog? She thinks … it's talking! She sees another dog in the reflection of the aluminum, where her reflection

should be! She has become one of the dogs of the night.

The author writes:

> The theme that seems to be developing here is "fear of the unknown," and the realization that I am just like what scares me most. Suffering, death, and violence are all a part of the thematic content in this dream. Also, wanting answers to things that cannot be answered and the frustration and fear that goes along with that feeling.

Although the journey here is quite short in duration, it too develops a three-act form:

Act I

- The journey begins in the safe, normal, and sheltered world of the shopping mall.
- The gatekeeper closes the door behind her so she cannot return.
- She faces the changed world of the nighttime parking lot.

Act II

- To get to the safe haven of her car she must evade the "wolf" pack, which wounds her (Achilles'?) heel and nearly gets her.
- When she finds a sanctuary, a helper rejects her needs as though she were a fleeing Jew in Nazi-dominated Europe.
- The dogs, now more plainly her demons, have caught up with her again. Dogs in Greek mythology are associated with Hecate and witchcraft.

Act III

- Expecting to be devoured she finds that one dog talks to her and helps her. Though her own species rejects her, an enemy reveals himself a friend and mentor. Can she trust him?
- In reality's mirror, she finds she has involuntarily joined the enemy by becoming one of them.

The *shapeshifter* transforms from one form to another in order to confuse, lie, deceive, help, delay, or otherwise challenge the central character. In fairy tales, he can become a wolf and then return to human form. Ultimately, this is all part of the hero's education.

Among the archetypes here—gatekeeper, fleeing victim, pursuing demons, a false savior who renounces her—are three appearances by *shapeshifters*, protean figures that reveal themselves in different guises, morphing from one into another. The garage attendant is one, the talking dog is the second. She herself becomes the third when discovering in the mirror that she has changed into "one of the dogs of the night."

Changing from human into animal is one of the shapeshifter's classic abilities, and Vogler[1] believes shapeshifters are often catalysts for change. The garage attendant who should help her betrays his responsibilities and sends her out into the night. In another reversal, or *plot point*, the dog that came to devour her becomes her mentor—another archetype—advising her that the man cannot understand her. She understands she has become a dog on seeing herself in the garage's polished wall alongside her fearsome canine guide. Because she belongs with the outcast creatures, the man tries to evict her.

Analyze the dream, not the dreamer. The separation can be a fine line, but the dream is a tale, and the dreamer a person. Analyzing the dreamer is likely to be intrusive and objectionable, and make the author feel forced into self-exposure.

I find the end, or *coda,* very ambiguous yet oddly moving. That she has a calm adviser is hopeful but it is disturbing that she has become what she most fears. To press any further would be to second-guess what the symbols mean to the writer, and we have pledged to examine the story, not psychoanalyze the writer.

Note

1 Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, 2nd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998).

Going Further

Available at the website www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger are the following additional projects: **Assignment 16–2: Surreal Narrative**, **Assignment 16–3: Linking Dreams into One Narrative**, and **Assignment 16–4: Dream and Myth**. Books that might be helpful:

Buñuel, Luis. *My Last Sigh*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003 (The father of cinema surrealism, who made some of the most contentious and dreamlike films of the 20th century, writes candidly about his development—from boyhood in provincial Spain to his involvement in Paris with the great surrealist painters, writers, and filmmakers).

Condron, Barbara. *The Dreamer's Dictionary*. SOM Publications, 1995 (Help with interpreting dreams, their symbolism and metaphysical meanings in "multidimensional consciousness").

Jung, Carl. *Man and His Symbols*. Dell, 1968 (Jung posited the notion of a collective unconscious, and his work dovetails with the folklorist Joseph Campbell's in distinguishing what is innate to mankind and thus culturally universal).

Jung, Carl, Carl Gustav Jung, and Aniella Jaffe. *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*. Knopf, 1989 (Jung's autobiography taken down at the end of his life).

Koch-Sheras, Phyllis and Amy Lemley. *The Dream Sourcebook: A Guide to the Theory and Interpretation of Dreams*, 2nd ed., McGraw Hill, 2000 (A cultural and physiological history of dreams and dreaming that instructs in recall techniques. Classifies dreams as message; healing; problem solving and creative; mystical, visionary, or "high"; completion; recurring; and lucid, in which the dreamer is aware of dreaming).

17 Adapting a Short Story for the Screen

The next resource to explore is the published short story, a literary cousin to the oral tale. Choose one you could adapt as a thirty-minute film.

Assignment 17–1: Short Story Analysis

Step 1: Make up a portfolio that includes:

- A photocopy of the story
- A cover sheet giving title, name of author, and place and year of publication
- Your adaptation of the story presented in scene outline

Step 2: **Describe briefly**:

- What attracts you about the story
- Your interpretation of the story's *premise* or ruling idea
- Its cinematic and dramatic strengths
- What you think its underlying meaning will be to an audience

Step 3: Now describe:

- Who is the protagonist and who the antagonist (see sidebar)
- How the main character develops
- Through whose POV we see the story, and how you might go about changing or varying this

Of course, you should never adapt anything in copyright for publication or public performance without first securing the proper permissions, but here we are simply exploring the problems. These can be treacherous for the unwary. This chapter's goals are for you to:

The *protagonist* is the original Greek name for the central character with whom we *identify* and whose fortunes we follow as he or she tries to get,

do, or accomplish something. The *antagonist* stands in his or her way. Usually this is another character, but a group, force of nature, or some aspect of the main character's own psyche may be antagonistic.

- Sample the delights of the short-story form
- Find one dealing with a world and themes to which you strongly resonate
- Find one visual and cinematic, or that can be made so
- Find one appropriate to thirty-minutes of screen time
- Assess the problems of adapting a literary form to one that is visual and behavioral

Good fiction takes hold of the reader's imagination, but beware, this happens through literary means for which no screen equivalent may exist! No literary story is utterly untranslatable to the screen, but most pose difficulties, some grave or even disabling. Many authors, for instance, take us inside the main character's consciousness and tell the story from an interior, subjective point of view. Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner, and other, more recent "stream of consciousness" writers like to explore their characters' psychological processes and pressures from the inside. This poses massive difficulties if you try to adapt their work to the screen or stage. You could of course make your main character talk to herself, think aloud using voice-over, or let her debate her situation with a confidante, but generally these are clumsy solutions. Then again, a literary work's authorial voice, and the attitudes it implies, can also evade adaptation. As an acid test, consider whether the narrative remains discernible if translated into silent movie form, dependent on images and action. A story that holds special meaning for you may stimulate you into inventing truly imaginative solutions, for the energy to innovate comes from inspiration. Or you may simply have to concede defeat and move on to other pastures.

Here is a questionnaire for testing and preparing a story for adaptation. No assignment you undertake will probably use more than portions of what follows, which may seem exhaustively thorough. Especially if you are working alone and without guidance, tackle only what is meaningful at this

time. The rest will fall into place as you gain experience.

Evaluating a Story for Adaptation to the Screen

All art emerges from the shaping pressure of limitations. These loom large when you transfer a story from one medium to another, and especially if you have pledged great fidelity to the original. Should you even try, given that each medium is so different? More important, surely, is to be true to the spirit of the story you choose, rather than to the specifics of its expression.

> *"Faithful" adaptations* from literature to film tend to miscarry because each medium has very different strengths and weaknesses. To avoid over-reverence toward the literary original, concentrate on what the screen can deliver well.

In literature the author can give privileged access to the characters' thoughts and feelings, but the screen becomes unbearably clumsy when it tries doing the same thing. The screen is closer to actuality, and the nearest we ever get to another person is from closely observing what they do and say. Using experience and empathy, we infer their internal state from their external actions. Cinema and theatre audiences do this from the behavioral *evidence* that the film or play offers. This said, restrictions inherent in theatrical or cinematic forms can spur you to find creative solutions. Thus film history contains all sorts of radical experiments at rendering consciousness, and these become all the more interesting when you've sampled the difficulties yourself.

Keep in mind, as you look for a candidate story, that you are searching for material that will translate well into a scene-by-scene outline for the screen. You'll recall from Chapter 13 that outlines:

- Are in brief, short-story form.
- Are written in the present-tense, and third person.
- Start a fresh paragraph for each new scene (that is, with each new location or stretch of time).
- Describe only what an audience would see and hear from the screen.
- Never include characters' thoughts or technical information about the

production.
- Summarize all conversations—Example: “Pablo tells Marguerite how angry he felt when he was put in the orphanage.”

During your search, consider anthologies from some under-explored aspect of your own regional, cultural, or ethnic background. Treat whatever calls to you with skepticism until you have read it several times. Consider how well it would function as silent cinema, which, in the absence of sound, depends wholly on action.

Scale in treatments for film refers to the amount of content, number of characters, and complexity of plot in relation to the chosen screen time. Scaling up or down may require not only compression or expansion, but altering content in order to preserve credibility.

Discussion

When considering adaptations, ask the following questions:

- Does the story seem to reflect the interests and values of its adaptor?
- Has the adaptation made deliberate and creative use of its new medium?
- Does the adaptation feel encumbered by its origin or liberated from it?
- Is the *scale* (see sidebar) suitable for its screen time (thirty minutes)? In a fifteen-minute story you can probably do justice only to one main character. Trying to handle more would make your story feel truncated and superficial.
- Is the central character’s problem singular, clear, and compelling?
- Is there a discernible pattern in the relationships between the characters?
- Is the crisis cinematic—that is, has it been made behavioral and evident—or is it internal and likely to evade full notice?
- Does the story deliver growth in one of its characters or a thematic development?
- Does the adaptation deliver the same level of meaning as the original? Is it less, more, or different?

Examples

The NYU students’ responses that follow are to an assignment that was

originally more limited. It called only for a story summary, an interpretation of the author's underlying purpose, and a description of perceived strengths and problems. The summaries and discussions are, however, concise and remain useful.

Example 1: "An Encounter," from Dubliners, by James Joyce (Peter Riley)

Summary. The narrator of "An Encounter" is a young Irish boy bored with the monotony of school life and the Wild West games that he and his friends play in the evenings. Along with two classmates he decides to skip school and go on an adventure: a journey down to the port in Dublin, and a ferry crossing to a place called the "Pigeon House." One of the boys, fearful of reprisals, does not turn up at the appointed time. But Mahony, a tough kid armed with a slingshot, meets the narrator and the two set off on their journey.

The boys enjoy themselves down at the wharf, watching the ships, eating lunch with the sailors. They cross the river in the ferry and wander through Ringsend, buying biscuits in the local shops and chasing a stray cat through the street. Eventually they realize they are too tired to continue their journey and rest in a field before turning back.

As the two sit there, a bizarre old man in ratty clothes passes them, then turns to come back their way. He sits down next to them and asks them about school and books, identifying the narrator as one who is a "bookworm" like himself, not one "for games" like Mahony. With a smile that reveals the gaps in his yellowed teeth, the man interrogates them about the many "sweethearts" they each must surely have. He continues, speaking about how much he admires beautiful young girls. The narrator is wary of this strange figure, who springs away and then returns. Mahony darts off after the cat they were chasing, and the old man remains silent next to the narrator. Then he breaks into a frightening monologue about whipping insolent young boys, how boys who have sweethearts and keep secrets should be whipped without mercy. He tells the narrator he would "whip such a boy as if he were

unfolding some elaborate mystery."

The narrator, disturbed and afraid, leaps up and pretends to tie his shoe. Then he bids the man goodbye and climbs the slope of the field, fearful that the man will grab him by the ankles. He calls to Mahony across the field, and the other boy mercifully comes to his rescue.

The Author's Underlying Purpose. Joyce shows how anyone seeking adventure is confronted with the unsavory elements that such a world harbors. By flouting the conventions of home and school, the adventurer is faced with some terrifying truths, for the old man claims the narrator as belonging more in his world than to the one he left behind. The narrator cannot simply close his eyes to "darker things."

Problems/Strengths. Problems arise because "An Encounter" is told entirely in the first person; some problems are particularly evident in the opening pages wherein the narrator describes activities and brief situations that span a great deal of time. But these passages could easily be altered for the purposes of a short film. The narrative voice is a strong one, and it might be interesting to use some narration, [perhaps] an older man looking back on a formative encounter of his youth. This piece relates quite closely to my themes in that it once again deals with individuals taking steps over boundaries to confront something darker. The narrator's life can never be the same now that he knows what exists on the fringes of his safe world. He will not have the simple, blind life that Mahony is intended to lead.

Peter is right; this first-person story does pose problems. However, if we ask to whom the main character might be telling the story, we see he could be addressing friends later in school or the boy who didn't show up. In the telling, his narrated memories could turn into present-tense happenings, but unless the listener plays an active part, this device might seem ungainly and artificial. In this regard even Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is flawed, because it uses a servant as a narrator who plays no active part in the events. True, the reader quickly forgets her, but her physical presence in a film would be intrusive and unnecessary. Seeing this, we would quickly understand she is a screenwriter's convenience.

A strength in Peter's choice is that the main characters initiate the action. By rebelling against the suffocating, sheltered world of their school, and choosing the unknown delights of the docklands, they become energetic adventurers—until, that is, the advent of the perplexing older man, whose dominant characteristic is a masked sexual frustration.

So, what is this older man trying to get, do, or accomplish? By urging the boys to share their amorous experiences, he seems in search of vicarious excitement. But surely he knows they have none, and is after something else? His insidious, chummy manner suggests he is probing the remaining boy's vulnerability. This is unsettling and points toward pedophile "grooming" (systematic breaking down of a child's resistance to sexual intentions). The boy senses something overheated in this and takes flight (as I remember doing at a similar age). What makes the story poignant is that the central character is young and sensitive, and he may come to regard all adult sexuality as tainted. His friend Mahony remains untouched because his sensibilities are too coarse to be receptive.

Asking *what a character trying to get, do, or accomplish* is the key to getting inside them. Each new round of answers reveals new subtexts, new underlying motivations. Apply this simple inquiry to the life going on around you, and note all the agendas you now see. If you really want to challenge yourself, try keeping tabs on your own motivations.

Example 2: "Le Dîner de Cons," by Francis Veber (Louis Leterrier)

This is a fairly recent short story. Its French title can be translated as "Dumb Supper." The author is Francis Veber, a well-known French author-director. Some of his most famous work has been remade in such Hollywood films as *The Toy* or, more recently, *The Birdcage.*

Summary. It's Thursday night and for Peter Brochant and his friends it is Dumb Supper day. The rule of this game is rather simple: each brings along the most stupid person they could find. The person that has discovered the most spectacularly simpleminded is declared the

winner.

Tonight, Peter is ecstatic: he has found a rare pearl of dumbness. The ideal retard. "A world-class dummy!" Frankie Pigeon, public servant peon at the Internal Revenue Service. Frankie's only passions are the models he makes with matches.

But what Peter doesn't know is that Frankie more than anything else is one of the most unlucky people, and one of the masters in creating catastrophes…. But tonight Peter doesn't feel that great because he's thrown out his back. He tries to call the meeting off. But he has no way of contacting Frankie on time, so Frankie will arrive at Peter's luxurious apartment and, alarmed by Peter's situation, will decide to stay with Peter and refuse all of his host's invitations to leave. This is the beginning of a long nightmare for Peter Brochant, in which his entire universe crumbles around him.

The Author's Underlying Purpose. To show first that the richest and most intelligent people are most of the time not the happiest people alive. They have so many skeletons in their closet that it is sometimes hard to contain them all. Also the superiority complex they constantly carry is sometimes unbearable, especially when they realize that the people whom they consider inferior are most of the time better off being that way in this world. His purpose is therefore rather simple. It is a gentle criticism of today's society where, even if we believe that class divisions have vanished, they are still very much present.

Problems/Strengths. Strange coincidences are pivotal in this story. Its compression—the entire action taking place in one evening and in one location (Peter Brochant's apartment)—is both the strength and weakness of this piece. Sometimes this becomes repetitive, and the other characters who interact in the rest of the piece with our two protagonists feel a little hemmed in. Another strength is because it is rather original, especially in America, to see this kind of story applied in that kind of setting. If we were to adapt this story for the screen, its cost would be ridiculously cheap. Isn't that all we are looking for when writing a short film?

> At the end of the story Peter eventually realizes his mistake in misjudging his guest. He will find a new friend in Frankie and reevaluate all of his life in the process. This moral falls inside two of my themes: we find our most sincere friends in the strangest of places and situations, and the idea that several steps must be passed in order to develop one's own identity. There is a little bit of Peter Brochant in every one of us. No one is open-minded enough.

Louis is understandably taken with the story's moral purpose—that our first valuations are often founded upon thoughtless prejudice—but he doesn't say how the all-important steps in Peter's inner transformation are to become outwardly visible. This story looks difficult to adapt since Peter's internal changes show only as a gradual relaxation in his tendency to judge others, but the author has since made it into a film whose English title is *The Dinner Game* (1998, Figure 17–1).[1] A story about a change of heart succeeds only if it can show a series of clear behavioral steps. Then its actors have a series of turning points to portray.

Every successful screen narrative—comedy, tragedy, or anything else—depends on being conceptualized as a series of behaviors, each leading to the next like the building blocks in a flow chart. Actions speak louder than words, so the art of adaptation lies in turning a literary work into a flow of visually communicative sequences, each yielding action and visual or aural evidence for the audience to ponder and interpret.

The next stages of development in Louis's adaptation would be to block out those steps in his main character's development, and then invent behavioral clues as evidence of the inward changes Peter is experiencing—no easy task.

Figure 17–1 The Dinner Game, in which a group of friends compete to see who can invite the stupidest dinner guest (frame from the film).

Active expectation. Effective drama presents a series of proactive, behavioral building blocks, each causing us to question and hypothesize. This makes us actively speculate, rather than passively witness.

Overview

Both short story examples arrive through the main characters' minds and perceptions—hardly surprising, since successful short stories capitalize on what literature does best. The corollary is that less worthy literature sometimes makes better adaptation material, especially if it is action-oriented and melodramatic. Jean-Luc Godard reveled in taking plots from the French pulp fiction *Serie Noir*.

Picking a promising literary *property* (existing work under consideration for adaptation) requires a rather confident sense of how you could adapt it for the screen. Until hard experience teaches this clarity, you are vulnerable (as I learned to my cost) to the seduction of language—hardly the worst of fates. Strip good literature of its interior, contemplative qualities, and reduce it to its plot line, and you offend its fans with a travesty of the original. Plenty of television adaptations of the classics fall into this trap.

Of course, Peter's and Louis's adaptations might still become first-rate films. Their work is just a first skirmish, and much serious, extended

wrangling waits down the road. Never be deterred from any story that you really, really like. Not, anyway, until you have done considerable work at trying to solve the particular problems it presents, which will bring its own fascination and enlightenment.

Notes

1 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119038/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl. This story was also the basis for an American film adaption, *Dinner for Schmucks* (2010).

2 Sadly, the film seems only obtainable used and in NTSC format VHS tape. Not even Facets Multimedia (www.facets.org), the largest and most knowledgeable videotheque in North America, carries it.

Going Further

Available at the website www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger are the following additional projects: **Assignment 17–2: Adaptation Issues** and **Assignment 17–3: Dramatic Breakdown**.

A short story often contains the kernel of a whole feature film, and sometimes the screen version surpasses the depth of the original. One such is Nicholas Roeg's mystery *Don't Look Now* (1971), taken from a short story by Daphne du Maurier. It is a superb, tight, highly cinematic development of du Maurier's fascination with spiritualist dimensions beyond death. Hitchcock's classic *Rear Window* (1954) came from Cornell Woolrich's "It Had to Be Murder." Like all of Hitchcock's films, it takes on a life all its own. *Across the Bridge* (1957), on which I was an editing assistant as a youth, came from a Graham Greene story and starred Rod Steiger at the peak of his form playing an Enron-type executive on the run from Interpol.

Here are some books about the adaptation process and an excellent guide to legal issues in filmmaking. The Skaggs volumes are invaluable studies of films made from classic short-story origins. In case I have sounded too negative about subjective short stories, John Korty's masterly *The Music School* (1976) came from a five-and-a-half-page story by John Updike, and is set entirely in a man's mind.[2]

Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film.* 1957. (A classic that does an excellent job

of assessing adaptations of such classics as *Wuthering Heights, Pride and Prejudice, The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Madame Bovary*).

Donaldson, Michael and Lisa Calif. *Clearance & Copyright 4th Edition: Everything You Need to Know for Film and Television.* 2014 (Superb on copyright, acquiring rights, public domain, setting up writing partnerships, and much else besides. For something legal, it is surprisingly readable).

Harrison, Stephanie. *Adaptations: From Short Story to Big Screen: 35 Great Stories That Have Inspired Great Films.* 2005 (Considers many short story to feature film adaptation processes, their difficulties and shortcomings).

Seger, Linda. *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film.* 1992 (Down-to-earth exploration of literature, theatre, and real-life stories as origins for films, with a chapter on that fine two-headed beast, docudrama).

Skaggs, Calvin. *The American Short Story Volumes 1 & 2.* 1977–1979 (These are the best short story comparative study resources I know. You get critical essays; scripts for the excellent 1970s films made from them in the *American Short Story* Public Broadcasting Service series; and a great collection of classic short stories by Willa Cather, Hart Crane, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, Henry James, Flannery O'Connor, James Thurber, John Updike, and Richard Wright).

18 Ten-Minute, News-Inspired Story

This assignment asks you to use a news story or photo as a starting point and to develop a theme from it. You will take a real event, develop an interesting ten-minute screen idea for a mass audience, and make it express a deeper concern or value you hold. In the process, we will cast aside the rules of good journalism and make a deliberately self-centered use of actuality.

It all starts when a wealthy eccentric lays an arm on your shoulders and offers you a ten-minute exposure on national television. Budget is no object, he says, but you must develop a ten-minute idea for a short, factually derived TV essay, and not worry about objectivity and political balance.

Ten minutes seems short for anything serious, but see what Robert Capa[1] can say about war in a single photo (Figure 18–1).

Its subject is a meagerly equipped peasant soldier at the instant of his death when his brains fly from his cranium. Before this moment, he was charging down a stubbly slope with his bayonet fixed toward the enemy; after, he will be just another crumpled body on a rural battlefield. This 100th-of-a-second crisis moment implies several tragic truths, but I will choose just one: *in a single irreversible moment, someone precious to family and friends forfeits his life for a belief.*[2] From this idea, difficult and even terrible issues flow.

Your ten minutes to communicate with an audience is thousands of times longer, so what can you come up with?

Find a real event from your photo or clippings collections that can serve as a vehicle for your questions and values. This need not lead you toward propaganda, since your job is not to preach, but to provoke awareness and questioning in your audience.

Propaganda and drama are different. In propaganda everything serves a foregone conclusion, while drama invites us to share what others must live through, issues that are often complex and even contradictory.

Figure 18–1 Famous photograph, taken during the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War, of a soldier at the moment of his death. (Photography by Robert Capa © 2001 by Cornell Capa/Magnum Photos.)

Assignment 18–1: A Moment and Its Consequences

Avoid all conventional intermediaries such as celebrity hosts, introducers, reporters, interviewers, and talking-head interviews.

Step 1: Pick an evocative photo or news story, providing a copy with your assignment.

Step 2: Supply a working hypothesis.

Step 3: Outline your television presentation of ten minutes exploring the event in the picture and its consequences. You might, for instance, imagine the son of Robert Capa's soldier going over all that his family members lost at that moment.

Step 4: Add brief notes on how your television idea might be covered and presented, and its strengths and weaknesses.

Time, Scale, and Crisis

Many public portals have a set screen time, and television especially so. Here you are allotted ten minutes, and your job is to make optimal use of it. Every story should be appropriate in *scale* to its likely audience and running time, so the challenge is to be concise, evocative, and moving. Can you say a lot in a little? This is what poetry seeks to do, and the secret lies in developing your central purpose by paring away all that is unnecessary. Begin by defining your story's apex:

- What will your story's crisis be?
- How much or little of the rising action (setup) do you need to get us there?
- How much of the falling action (resolution) after the apex will you need to show change and create a sense of closure?

Clearly defining the crisis, and what you need to support its rise and fall, always helps focus and intensify drama. You would be surprised how often writers postpone or avoid doing this.

The Myth of Objectivity

Can you be objective? In fact, no adaptation of fact made by human beings can be, since a tale of any kind is a construct that unavoidably reflects aspects of its creators' interests, assumptions, and beliefs. Look at old copies of the National Geographic, and marvel at the condescending way that non-white, non-middle-class cultures are depicted by reporters and photographers of the time. They considered themselves scientifically objective and anthropological but produced what now epitomizes the white colonial gaze. Our work will in time merit similar judgments, because we too see through the lens of our own subjective certainties. We must still aspire to fair-mindedness and relevance to a general audience, so the only antidotes are self-knowledge and critical awareness. Self-questioning while making a working hypothesis will help.

Discussion

- How well did the ideas you saw or heard fit into the ten-minute requirement?
- Did the hypothesis allude to the necessary expository detail?

- Did the film raise worthwhile social or other issues?
- Did it leave a satisfying sense of closure by the end?
- What belief system did you think emerged from the adaptation?
- How cinematic (imaginative visually and in form) was the adaptation?

Notes

1 Robert Capa (1913–1954), renowned war photographer.

2 An unresolved thirty-year debate continues as to whether Capa staged this photograph. Even if he did (which I don't believe) the significance of what it represents remains undiminished.

Going Further

Available at the website www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger are the following additional assignments: **Assignment 18–2: Reality TV Show**; **Assignment 18–3: Docudrama**; **Assignment 18–4: Based on a Real Story …**; **Assignment 18–5: Behind the Façade**; **Assignment 18–6: This Far, and No Farther**; **Assignment 18–7: Analyze Four News Items**; and **Assignment 18–8: Develop Interpersonal Difference**.

Here are book sources to help anyone interested in deriving story ideas from actuality or in exploring the hinterland between documentary and fiction.

Aufderheide, Patricia and Peter Jaszi. *Reclaiming Fair Use: How to Put Balance Back in Copyright*. 2011 (Freedoms you can claim under the fair use doctrine in the digital age).

Bernard, Sheila Curran. *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen*, 3rd ed., 2010 (A how-to that includes the author's experiences and interviews with documentary-makers, and the importance of treating filmmaking as a business).

Hemley, Robin. *Turning Life into Fiction*, 2nd ed., 2006 (Transforming real life into stories, gaining psychic distance between memoir and fiction, and the ethical and self-protective considerations that arise when you take liberties with fact).

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*, 6th ed., 2014 (My magnum opus in ten languages describing the history of the genre and the process of

making documentaries. Makes a case for all film language, and particularly that of documentary, being rooted in the psychological/emotional processes of human perception).

Rosenthal, Alan. *Why Docudrama? Fact-Fiction on Film and TV.* 1999 (Excellent anthology of essays laying out the history, principles, and uses of this sometimes treacherously hybrid form).

19 Documentary Subject

How richly, even dramatically ordinary people lead their lives is the specialty of documentary, and making it appeals to those who see living as an inspired, improvisational process. This makes documentarians the jazz musicians of filmmaking, and their brethren in fiction are like the symphony orchestra that needs a score to function. There are however significant fiction directors who prefer laying an improvisational foundation with their cast, figures such as Robert Altman, Ingmar Bergman, John Cassavetes, Jean-Luc Godard, and Mike Leigh. We will look at their methods later in Chapter 22, "Catalyzing Drama."

Research

Research for documentary and fiction are similar, because novelists and screenwriters often immerse themselves in the situations they mean to write about. Literary fiction, screenplays, and documentaries all set out to achieve credible and entertaining visions of the human condition.

> Writers *research* those they intend to write about, to see how they live their lives and handle real situations. The kind of research so necessary in documentary allows the novelist to write with similar depth and authority.

The ability to research real people in their actual surroundings is highly rewarding, for nothing can equal the profundity and sheer unexpectedness of the real. Seldom will you find stories readymade, but you will find a profusion of parts waiting for you to imaginatively assemble them into whole stories. The challenge if you want to portray a yoga ascetic, a mine-clearing squad, or a young African shepherd at work will always be the same: to figure out what story to tell, what point of view to take, and what convictions to examine.

Like a sculptor visualizing what statue lies within the block of stone, the documentary-maker must decide what to liberate from the surfeit of everyday detail that obscures every subject. Stories emerge from the framing and directing that the audience sees, feels, and considers.

Modern documentary seldom arranges life for the camera; instead it aims to capture particular events as they occur. This can be highly unpredictable, so the documentarian gambles on capturing what can reasonably be anticipated, and what else comes as gifts (or blows) from the gods.

Planning a documentary seems maddeningly speculative. How, people ask, can you possibly *plan* for something that has not yet happened? Why even bother? Why not just wait and shoot whatever occurs? Ask a documentary editor if this works, and he or she will tell you that a passive approach produces a scattered record, not focused documentary materials. Real authorship relies on the interpretive intelligence of an overall vision. Who would shoot a football match without knowing the game? If you are to create a compelling picture of a match, you must know the rules, the characteristics of the players, the referee, and the supporters. To make yourself ready to capture all that matters, you write a hypothesis to help organize what you know, and help sensitize you to the unexpected the moment it arises.

Thus a documentary proposal promises what reasonably can be expected and predicts as many of the unknown outcomes as possible. You cannot, for instance, foresee that your film on Civil War games will be subverted when a cannon wheel runs over an artilleryman's foot, or that the wailing siren of an EMT crew will invade the 1860s battlefield. You can know that accidents happen, and find out which are the commonest.

Imagine, instead, that you set out to cover a volatile marital situation. You face true uncertainty, but also the promise of a film with considerable dramatic tension. David Sutherland's *The Farmer's Wife* (Public Broadcasting Service documentary series, USA, 1998) shows in harrowing detail a Nebraska couple battling to hold on to the family farm as they slowly run out of money. Every new crisis in their deteriorating marriage brings multiple possible outcomes, and for each the crew must make contingency plans and shoot accordingly.

For this assignment, begin by aiming to involve us in something important to you. See if you can provoke us into strong feelings and critical thinking.

Documentarians tend to choose between two main shooting

philosophies. *Observational documentaries* treat reality like anthropologists, aiming to remain relatively invisible to their subjects. In *participatory documentaries*, directors can interact at will with their subjects to catalyze truth by providing challenge, stimulus, or opposition.

Observe Truth or Intercede to Provoke It?

A basic decision is whether you want to film like an anthropologist and use a strictly observational style to capture truths, or whether you interact with your subjects to catalyze them. You may even need to appear on-camera yourself. If so, you are making a participatory style of film, even a self-reflexive one (the documentarian's version of selfies!).

Figure 19–1 Patricio Guzman's *Nostalgia for the Light* juxtaposes the telescopes in the Chilean desert with people digging for the bones of their loved ones who disappeared during the dictatorship (frame from the film).

Today most documentary-makers avoid TV style interviewers and "talking head" shots like the plague, unless the speaker is divulging something extraordinary or deeply felt. Recent works like Patricio Guzman's deeply moving *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010, Figure 19–1) mostly shun narration and to-camera interviews. Instead they tell their stories mainly, but not exclusively, through imagery, action, and behavior. Every rule has its exceptions, and Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), apart from its

famous reenactment scenes, is largely interviews. Yet its characters, their story, and the presentation that Morris uses, are all so original and fantastic that the film belongs in a class by itself.

As your situation develops, your film's *setup* and subsequent *exposition* must provide enough information about the story's context to orient the audience. If your setting is a failing neighborhood grocery, for instance, you will need to show the context for the owner's sleepless nights of worry. You will need bank manager and wholesaler scenes that establish how market forces have encircled businesses like hers. You might also need to establish how supermarket chains force down their prices by removing employee benefits and shaving profit margins. To paint all the difficulties and ironies, you must gather good evidence and multiple versions. To make a documentary, you shoot a multiplicity of promising materials, then winnow the final content and meaning during editing.

This assignment, however, only asks that you propose what you would shoot and how you might use it.

Portraying Human Predicaments

Human problems arise when people fall prey to a combination of inner and outer forces. You don't need to depict them all—catalogs are the job of the social historian or sociologist—but you do need to cover the essentials that create conflict. The audience knows when a situation is over-simplified, incompletely justified, or rendered in the ideological monochrome of good versus evil. If, however, you show your grocery going bust through the perceptions of someone to whom the breakdown really *is* a matter of good and evil (a beleaguered teenage son, for instance), then you can sketch complex forces he is unable to appreciate *and* make us feel the poignancy of his simplified view.

Documentary is drama, and drama investigates the human condition. Effective documentary confronts us with its participants' paradoxes, fears, enigmas, and problems. You aim to go much further than presenting facts or reflecting what anyone present would see.

Like the best fiction films, documentaries are strongest when they show characters in action. Action is in the present, while interviews come from memory and describe what is already past and foreclosed. A historical subject, of course, can probably be made no other way, but current subjects are always best recorded in the present as they unfold. To watch two beginners clumsily piloting a canoe down a fast river is far more involving than seeing them recall it later. If, however, an agnostic canoeist finds himself praying that he will survive, something has occurred inside him that no amount of camerawork can reveal. Only voice-over or interview can get at that.

A documentary audience feels *dramatic tension* as uncertainty and anticipation, something the wise storyteller tries to keep on the boil.

Plan to film what will make the audience see, feel, and think about the issues. Often this means deliberately orchestrating a conflict between the opposing forces at work. Good drama, by making us aware and involved and by confronting us with contradictory evidence, stretches our emotional, critical, and analytical faculties.

You may ask, isn't this manipulation? Yes, it is. Manipulation is unavoidable in art generally, and in filmmaking in particular. You cannot take an objective shot, still less make an objective film. Every camera position, every length of action recorded, every choice in editing requires a subjective human decision, and thus everything is manipulated. Nothing objective here. All artworks are constructs meant to lead the spectator through the essentials of a gripping human experience. We turn to art when we long to see through other eyes, to feel what it is like to be someone else.

Confrontation

The forces in conflict in your film must meet each other in *confrontation*—something you may have to contrive so it happens on camera. With your encouragement, the pregnant daughter thrown out of the home two decades ago by her outraged father will get up courage and ask her mother, with whom she is still angry, why she failed to protest. She will ask, "Why didn't you try to save me?"

The uses of delay. The father of the mystery novel, Wilkie Collins, advocated delay in storytelling as a way to hold the reader's attention: "Make them laugh, make them cry, but make them wait." Good advice for all storytelling!

You need to show (not tell) the contradictory evidence that a reasonable person would interpret with difficulty. Interesting characters must be deliberately developed, which means you show their complexities and contradictions, and delay resolving them onscreen as long as possible so the audience can make its own determinations.

You should avoid expounding causes, since we all thoroughly distrust "messages." Instead, let your audience draw its own conclusions from pertinently presented evidence (see sidebar on the uses of delay). Build in the ambiguities you could not resolve, since that respects the audience's intelligence.

"Character is fate." By making choices as we do, we help to construct our own destiny.

For the documentary work in this chapter, the goals are to:

- Find a real situation or event that resonates your chosen themes.
- Turn that situation into a factually based screen story that will serve your authorial purposes and interests.

To develop a subject for your documentary film, choose a situation from your collection of news-clippings, one that:

- Could be developed into a thirty-to-sixty-minute documentary film.
- Has an inbuilt sequence of events and an evolving character. That way, the film won't merely outline a static, unchanging situation like a scanner at work.
- Engages your audience in some significant aspect of the real world. (Meaning, it involves your audience in ways that might be fascinating, disturbing, aggravating, frightening, funny, engrossing—you name it).

When you discuss ideas for documentaries, consider the following questions:

- What is the topic, the "corner of life" you want to show us? What makes it potentially interesting and significant?
- Whose POV are we seeing through?
- What is the central conflict in the situation or main characters?
- Does the film promise a confrontation between the opposing forces its character faces?
- Do you see a development likely in the main character(s)? What is it?
- Can you find a distinctive style for your film?
- Does it have something heartfelt to show or say?
- How do you think you could most affect a general audience?

Many documentaries are biographical, and thus character-driven. Invariably characters of magnitude have issues in their lives that arise from the imperatives of their temperament. To show real people wrestling with their goals and demons is a richly satisfying way to explore the nexus between disposition and destiny. Best of all, by astute casting you can explore important issues in your own life—with no need to step in front of the camera yourself.

There are also:

- Event-driven documentaries that chronicle an event and its effect on given characters
- Diary documentaries, in which the camera becomes a notebook
- Essay documentaries, which do what a photo or literary essay might do
- Historical documentaries
- Travelogue documentaries
- Journey or process documentaries
- Reflexive documentaries, which reflect on the effects of making the film or on the filmmakers' conceptual process
- Fake documentaries ("mockumentaries"), that lampoon the clichés and deadly earnestness of the stereotypical documentary

There's something for everybody; some of these forms can be realized in one of the two other assignments calling for simple video documentaries rather than written proposal materials.

Assignment 19–1: A Documentary Subject

In your writing,

Step 1: Give a brief outline of the background or context to the subject.

Step 2: Describe your main character(s) and his/her/their major problem.

Step 3: Try to bring a magnifying glass to a situation that is significant but small. Resist the novice's urge to include everything life has taught you.

Step 4: Explain what your film's underlying story organization would be. Usually this requires that you:

a. Consider how to handle the progression of time in the movie

b. Decide whether the main character is the POV character

c. See if there is another valid POV you can use

Step 5: Describe any special approaches you might take in shooting, directing, interviewing, or any ironic editing techniques you'd use to get your thematic argument across.

Example

Documentary Subject (Angela Galyean)

Timmy B——, ten years old, hated going to school. His truancy became so chronic that his parents took him to a psychiatrist who prescribed Prozac as treatment for Timmy's obstinacy. At first, Timmy's reaction to the drug was positive. It was not until the psychiatrist increased his dosage that Timmy began to experience violent mood swings. "He'd get really angry and stuff like that. He'd scream at you and then a few minutes later, he'd love you and hug you and not even remember being so angry," his mother, Cindy, said after the court hearing.

Only weeks after the start of Timmy's Prozac regimen, the fourth-grader grabbed his three-year-old niece as a human shield, aimed a

twelve-gauge shotgun at a sheriff's deputy, and exclaimed, "I'd rather shoot you than go to school." It comes as no surprise that Timmy's lawyer blames this outburst on the antidepressant drug.

Timmy's court case is the first known to involve a child using Prozac, which has not been proved [safe] for use in children for any condition. The drug's label notes that Prozac's safety and effectiveness for children has not been established. But Prozac is used to treat fifty-six percent of depressed children's cases because it has been proven effective for adults.

"Timmy B——was under the influence of a mind-altering drug at the time of the incident," the B——s' attorney noted. Prozac is the world's largest-selling antidepressant, with sales of more than $1 billion a year. However, the drug's success has been clouded by claims that it causes violent mood swings and suicidal thoughts.

Angela writes:

This story is particularly fascinating to me because it involves an obvious dysfunctional family situation and the mystery/fascination of today's Prozac. I have always feared the use of Prozac and have intimately experienced its effects on people I have known before, after, and during the use of the drug. This case is unusually interesting to me because it incorporates a child's life and mind. Timmy's life has been permanently damaged by a decision he did not make.

The film would first focus on Timmy, his parents, and the events of Timmy's life before he hated school, and therefore prior to seeing his psychiatrist. Then it would cover his experience in therapy, and the event itself. I would like to push ahead to examine what effects the trial is having on Timmy and what his life is like now that things have calmed down. I am only concerned with the cellular life of Timmy and the B——s, and this would make up the heart of the film.

By showing as much as I could of the lifestyle they had and have, I could translate a truly human experience made unique by Timmy. The narrative organization would depend on what response I got from the B——s, their community, and the participants of the court case. These

people would be featured in the film, but my goal would be to show as little of the outside world as I could to parallel the entrapment of Timmy's mind while under the influence of the drug.

I have never made a documentary proper, so I would need to do miles of leg-work before diving into this project. It seems to me that this story might be able to tell itself, but I have a feeling that this is a common delusion of people making documentary films. Interviewing would need to be very intimate. Ideally, I would like to spend as much time as possible with the B——s so as to achieve ultimate comfort and ease within the interviews.

My particular moral stance on the subject of antidepressant drugs is quite simple. I think they are dangerous and unnecessary. That would have to be the moral slant the film would take, because I am very adamant and passionate about this subject. Going with the grain of the story, as I understand it, would be demonstrating a positive message in the minds of the participants, leading me to [hope for] further cooperation from the family. I tend to despise negative exposure in documentary subject films and plan to avoid that style at all costs.

Angela speaks truly when she says, "This story might be able to tell itself, but I have a feeling that this is a common delusion of people making documentary films." Nevertheless, her strategy is quite practical, involving as it does dividing her account into three parts that mirror the classic three-act drama:

I. *Backstory and exposition.* That is, life before using the drug, the boy's developing school phobia that led to his needing therapy.
II. *The struggle with a larger issue emerges.* A minor problem now turns into a much worse one as he begins taking the drug. His problem changes from school phobia to wildly fluctuating mood swings and violence. The story develops to a crescendo in the hostage-taking situation and culminates after his arrest in the rigmarole of a court case. The court decision probably represents the *climax* of the whole story.
III. *The resolution.* This is the only present-day section. It shows the

after-effects on the boy's daily life of the negative publicity and notoriety, and it questions whether the drug should be given at all, let alone to children.

Here is a main character so out of kilter that he probably denies he has any problem until Act III. So where is the conflict that will make this piece dramatic? It exists between Timmy and everyone else. Other options would be to locate Timmy's antagonist in the doctor who took the risky decision to use an under-tested drug on a child, or in Timmy's parents who discovered too late that they had been naïve to trust the experts. We might switch between all three POVs, whoever would be most effective from scene to scene. Whatever the solution, the implications are far-reaching and transcend Timmy's individual case. Consider:

- How desperate do a patient and his family have to become before a doctor resorts to risky treatment? AIDS patients, after all, had to wait in anguish while the Food and Drug Administration toiled in slow motion through its testing procedures.
- When should we trust experts, and when not? In the infamous Tuskegee experiments, poor southern black farmers were studied by the U.S. Public Health Service for forty years without either being told they had syphilis and without being given any treatment. For sheer racist cruelty, this rivals the Nazi medical experiments, and may be why African Americans have been apt to delay seeking medical help.

Angela's scars motivate her and lend authority to her convictions. However, depending on the user and the circumstances, every drug has side-effects and can be a blessing or a curse. To avoid making a film that falls into partisan simplification, I would recommend that Angela include those helped by the drug as well as those hurt by it.

Going Further

Available at the website www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger are the following additional assignments: **Assignment 19–2: Simple Voice-Over Personal Film** and **Assignment 19–3: Simple Voice-Over Historical Film**. If documentary or docudrama call to you, here is more guidance:

Aufderheide, Patricia. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. 2007 (Excellent, pocket-friendly introduction to the history, types of, and one hundred best documentaries).

McLane, Betsy. *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition*. 2012 (A history that also includes the Experimental Documentary, Visual Anthropology, and Environmental/Nature Films).

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed., 2010 (Ethical issues, documentary as a genre, its history and work in the world, and how to write about it).

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*, 6th ed. Focal Press, 2015 (Deals with the history of the form, developing proposals, shooting exercises, getting an education, and developing a career in documentary. Handles research procedures and the many conceptual/aesthetic dilemmas on the way to a final film).

Rosenthal, Alan. *Why Docudrama? Fact-Fiction on Film and TV*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1999 (An anthology of essays about the history, practice, and problems of docudrama).

Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*, 4th ed., 2007 (Experienced in television journalism, Rosenthal stresses the importance of writing prior to filming).

Rosenthal, Alan. *From Chariots of Fire to The King's Speech: Writing Biopics and Docudramas*. 2014 (Rosenthal is a highly experienced veteran of the documentary production, and an authoritative, committed proponent of the docudrama and biopic).

20 Thirty-Minute Original Fiction

An effective short fiction film is a potent and economical way to establish your abilities. Like a full-length work it demands a plot, characters, situations, style, and a substantial thematic purpose. Three classic shorts you can find on YouTube will dispel any doubts you may have about this. In Norman McClaren's classic pixillation (stop-frame animation) film *Neighbours* (Canada, 1952), two identical householders repose in their adjoining yards. When a flower springs up between them, they compete almost to the death for whose side of the fence it belongs. In *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (France, 1962) the American Civil War is the backdrop for Robert Enrico's haunting adaptation of an Ambrose Bierce short story. Through the central character's fantasy of escape, we feel how desperately the accused man wants to continue living at the very moment of his death. In less than thirty minutes, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (France, 1962), working almost entirely through stills, gives us an eerie underground world of time-traveling lovers in a ruined Paris after World War III (Figure 20–1).

The *authorial point of view* is the singular attitude that authors (or film directors) take toward the characters and events in their narratives. A strong, trenchant, authorial POV gives a work individuality, urgency, and vitality.

There is a perennial shortage of excellent short fiction films, in spite of their being the very best calling card to writing and/or directing as a professional. Like a feature, a short film must have an *authorial point of view* with something concise and arresting to say about the human condition, and this is what makes it a full test of a writer or director's authorial abilities. A short film, like a short story, usually:

- Sets up a main character rapidly and economically in a particular world
- Shows that character facing a problem, and having something special to accomplish, get, or do
- Pushes the main character to a point where he or she must take action

- Focuses on how that character tackles his/her problem
- Enlarges our sense of his/her main issues, vulnerability, and capacities through watching the central character handle one difficulty after another
- Makes the audience learn something, and maybe the main character too. Thankfully, not all stories are about winners, especially in comedy

Figure 20–1 Chris Marker's *La Jetée* evokes the desolation of a World War III survivor, repeatedly visited by the memory of a beloved woman in a once-perfect world (frame from the film).

This is how effective storytellers typically use their limited time with an audience, but short films, like any story or poem, can be endowed with almost any narrative vertebra, depending on their mood, special events, or other concerns.

Why do these elements so often appear? Probably because stories are rituals that bind us to someone with whom we can identify. We hope things will work out for him or her, but many stories end unhappily—*and yet still feel satisfying*. We recognize the truth that life is a gamble, and that unhappy outcomes are as true as happy ones. This, both beautiful and sad, is called *catharsis*.

Behind this lies an ancient and unchanging human need, which Michael

Roemer describes thus:

> The connection between story, or myth, and ritual has long been noted and debated. Ritual too constitutes a safe arena in which we can encounter the sacred or "real," acknowledge our helplessness and limitations, abandon our weapons and defenses, surrender control, forgive others, and be ourselves forgiven. Both ritual and plot conjugate the particular to the universal. Moreover, in ritual as in comedy and tragedy it is largely our fear, weakness, and failure—the very secrets that keep us apart in daily life—that bring us together.[1]

By invoking the troubling forces in our lives—the clashes of morality, the contradictions in human desires, and the battles against the forces of the universe—stories help us live with what remains unfinished and perhaps insoluble in our own lives.

While developing a short film idea, consider:

- What do you feel about this story at a gut level?
- What genre does this story belong in?
- What moral forces is the story handling and what work is it trying to do?
- What does its central character represent in the story's world?
- Are the stakes high enough for the central character? (You can often raise them without impairing the story's credibility.)
- What is the story's crisis, and how do you feel about it?
- Does anyone develop, and if they do, is it credible and satisfying?
- How would you rate the originality of the story?
- How would you rate its overall impact?

Assignment 20–1: Treatment for an Original Short Fiction Piece

Write an original treatment for a thirty-minute fiction film. Make it center on a single main character and lead us to understand his or her subjective point of view. It need not be one we necessarily agree with or like. Try to base the story on something you have closely observed or lived through, but avoid fictionalizing anything current. This would face

you with too many questions about fidelity to the real. Write:

Step 1: A scene outline summarizing the story.

Step 2: A working hypothesis defining the story's meaning and purpose.

Step 3: A "shopping list" of the sequences with their intended running times. Estimate running times by acting out each sequence as you time it, playing all the parts yourself, and visualizing each shot (but warn those within earshot—or risk being carted away in the rubber bus).

Examples

Example 1: Thirty-Minute Original Fiction Idea (Michael Hanttula)

Scene Outline. It is the forced-retirement day for the president of a major, but anonymous, corporation. Many people, especially a team of vice-presidents, are set to gain from the president's retirement. However, he has refused to comply and has turned his office into a bunker where he has been fending off would-be intruders, slaying anyone making an attempt to oust him from his position. One by one, lower-ranking employees have made their way up to the top floor and tried to charge his makeshift bunker. Each time, they are terribly wounded or in some way incapacitated. Over time, the vice-presidents have run out of secretaries, assistants, and coffee people to send. Before giving up, they remember Farrago, the mailroom boy in the basement.

They send a message down to tell him that his assistance is greatly needed and that his help will undoubtedly result in the grand promotion he has been hoping for. Farrago hurries up to the lobby of the building, where the vice-presidents and heads-of-departments have established a headquarters. Tables are overturned, facing a bank of elevators on the far wall. People are busy scurrying around, looking over reports, yelling into communication devices, plotting maps and missions.

The main vice-president quickly briefs Farrago on the situation, telling of the evil actions by the president and the severity of [the need to remove] him from office. As she does this, one of the elevator doors makes a beeping sound and begins to open. Everyone dives for cover behind the tables. A secretary slowly crawls out of the elevator on his hands and knees. Many people rush to his assistance. He is clearly dying of undefined wounds. In his last breaths he is able to give the latest position of the president and warns that it will be impossible to take over the president's stronghold. He dies and Farrago becomes discouraged. However, the head vice-president reminds him of the promotion that will be his if he can dethrone the president. He agrees to the mission, collects supplies and maps, and heads up the towering building by elevator.

Inside the elevator Farrago dreams of the power and prestige his promotion will bring him as he is hailed slayer of the president by the rest of the staff. On the top floor, he gets out and finds a labyrinth of office cubicles before him. He searches through the maze, running into dead ends, fallen adversaries that have attempted this mission before him, and various traps that impede his journey.

Along the way he runs into a guard who has decided to protect the president. They get into a scuffle and the guard is close to winning. But Farrago manages to escape the guard's grasp and, fleeing back into the labyrinth, stops short of one of the traps and takes refuge down another corridor. The guard, in fast pursuit, barrels around the corner, and flings himself into the trap. As Farrago closes in to finish off the guard, he discovers that the guard is himself. He stops, the guard begs him to help the president—praising the president's goodness and condemning the evil staff that has been trying to usurp him. [The guard dies.]

Farrago, now quite confused, travels further into the labyrinth after the guard's death, still in search of the president. Eventually, he happens upon his office and finds the president looking out of the window. He is aware of Farrago's presence, but not taking action.

The president states what Farrago is here for and simply asks that

certain affairs [be] taken care of by the corporation after he is gone. The president tells of his initial hopes for the company and how he had wanted to do so much good. But when he tried, his staff revolted and have [since] been trying to get him out.

These are surprisingly humane desires for someone declared a "villain of the people" by his staff. Farrago looks about the office, seeing awards and letters of gratitude from charities and other signs of his "good deeds." The words of the head vice-president and of the loyal guard echo through his head. The president knows about the offers of promotion that his staff will have made to Farrago and agrees that this is the best way for him to advance. However, Farrago's dream of the life of luxury that promotion offers is darkened by visions of the type of person he would become (like the staff is now) if he had such power. He moves toward the president, drawing the weapon that the staff gave him.

Back in the staff's headquarters, many are waiting anxiously, while others are still in a great deal of commotion (making deals with other companies, assuring [them] that the president is being replaced). The elevator begins its descent from the top floor and the tension in the control room becomes greater with each floor the elevator descends. Eventually, it reaches the ground floor and the elevator bell rings, the doors burst open, and Farrago and the president come charging out together.

Meaning/Purpose of the Story. This is about the corruption of power and the struggle to do good. Michael's central character Farrago wants promotion above all, and will do anything to get it, thus giving no thought of the actions he'll have to take. At first the staff manipulate him with promises of promotion and power. Then, as he searches for the president, the guard confronts him by stopping him to make him consider what he is doing. Arriving at the president, he finds the head of the enterprise is only a person like anyone else, not the monster that the staff described. Farrago loses his eagerness to aid the vice-presidents' struggle against the "dictator" on seeing that the president

has the more appealing morals. However, he realizes that by helping the president, he loses his opportunity for promotion. His conflict is, therefore, the choice between advancing his career and trying to be a good person. In the end, he sides with the embattled president against the insurgent forces of the staff.

Shopping List of Sequences

1 Photomontage under titles of actions occurring in the headquarters. Use of voice-over and sound design to give the backstory (previous attempts to usurp the president, staff's decision to call upon the mailroom attendant)—45 seconds.

2 Farrago in mailroom (basement) amidst piles and piles of unsorted mail, working diligently, message drops from above with request to come above and see vice-presidents about a promotion—45 seconds.

3 Farrago entering the lobby/headquarters, being briefed, witnessing failed attempt emerging from elevator, agreeing to go, being sent up the elevator—4 minutes.

4 Farrago in elevator, dreaming of his prosperous future. He is shaken out of dream when elevator arrives on the top floor—30 seconds.

5 He sees the labyrinth before him and begins to proceed through it. He runs into dead ends, dead secretaries, and pitfalls—2 minutes.

6 He runs into guard, battles, flees, hides, guard is injured, they talk, Farrago continues on—3 minutes.

7 He finds the president, enters his office, and listens to his story. He dreams [about the choice] between the "good life" and leading a "good" life. He makes his decision—4 minutes.

8 Farrago and the president return to the lobby, surprising the staff, they attack—1 minute.

Approximate time: 16 minutes.

This delightful Monty Pythonesque comedy fulfills its genre norms. Each genre as we have said—be it farce, comedy *noir*, screwball comedy, historical fiction, buddy movie, or psychological thriller—comes with a set of audience expectations that the artist may both use and constructively subvert (see sidebar).

> Each *genre* has its conventions that are useful but confining. These establish a rapport with the audience, but always threaten to make a piece predictable. Anything of excellence will challenge or even subvert the norm, which helps create some of the tension that all stories need.

Though some sequences run longer than Michael estimates, the whole will still fall short of the intended thirty minutes. So from the point of screen time alone the piece unquestionably needs developing. The situation outlined at the beginning (underlings being sent, one by one, to capture the president) seems too important, too full of potential comedy, to remain buried in the backstory, which by definition we learn about but do not see.

Maybe the story should start at an earlier stage, when our hero is still an obscure minion in his basement mailroom. From this point onward, it feels as though some story elements are missing. When you get this feeling, you can often uncover hidden potential by comparing it with its closest parallel in myth, legend, or history. Michael's story is about a kingdom, with the corporation president as its king, and the labyrinthine building is his castle. The king is under siege and his barons are about to depose him. This is a palace revolution in which the leader gets elbowed out of power because of his age, sickness, fatal mistakes, or corruption. Here, the leader loves power too much to step down, and underlings wrangle for a place in the new hierarchy. Sequestered high in the building, the leader is hiding from his inferiors, the body politic has become unstable and anarchic, and all his minions want now is his power for themselves.

From the viewpoint of folk story, Farrago is the lowly page or kitchen boy. Pressed into service because everyone else has failed, he looks simpleminded, but this appearance is deceptive and suits his purposes. He means to gain

advancement in one gargantuan leap, not by inching up some stupid corporate ladder. Is he naïve, or is he opportunistic like the VPs in the lobby, who have cannily sent their underlings out to die in battle? Farrago's moral ambiguity helps raise the tale's tension and could be played up further. Starting out as an Everyman, Farrago doesn't earn the moral capital to triumph, so the longer the story keeps the odds stacked against him, the longer the delayed outcome will generate doubt and dramatic tension.

Once Farrago glimpses his reward, he rushes forward into the labyrinth with all its traps and fallen fighters. Soon he runs into what every respectable labyrinth contains, a guard like the legendary minotaur. Having passed tests of luck, ingenuity, and persistence, Farrago must now outwit the gatekeeper of the inner sanctum. On passing this test too, he wins information (that the president is really a good person), which he unwisely accepts at face value.

This is problematical, for it stymies further dramatic tension. Better would be to make him distrust this information in case it leads him into another trap. The other big problem is that the guard "is himself." If Michael built this reflexive identity into the fabric of the whole piece, it could be an interesting psychological puzzle, but this single occurrence is neither followed up, nor used later, as it could be if Farrago found that the president was himself too, for example. A single use of the device proves inconsistent and misleading, so I recommend dropping it. Instead, maybe the scene should be played so that the dying guard appears to set Farrago up for the final trap.

Then the guard emerges as a *shapeshifter*. Initially he is an opponent but he turns out to be a helper in disguise. Conversely, he could seem helpful but really be laying a trap—which would make him a *trickster*. To sustain tension, Michael could make Farrago assume he is the latter, and then hint that the inner sanctum is a lethal trap. To heighten the tension, Farrago could navigate several dangerous-looking situations along the way, as in the sequence when Dorothy and her friends arrive at the Wizard of Oz's spooky castle. Finding the president undefended could again be a situation of suspense as we wait for the bolt from the blue.

When the president claims to be a good person, Farrago should initially disbelieve him. To keep us guessing, Farrago should interrogate the president,

perhaps to establish how the stand-off happened or question why the president wouldn't resign. Like Faust, Farrago might appear to bargain with the devil as he persuades himself that the president is a misunderstood man. Believing this, he would be in worse danger. What do we want for him?

In Michael's ending, Farrago emerges from the elevator in cahoots with the embattled president. For it to work, Farrago's options must remain ambiguous all the way until the elevator door opens and the unholy duo reveal themselves as gun-slinging partners. But this seems like a trick ending. What in fact will the partners now do? Will they die in a *Bonnie and Clyde* shoot-out? The president might, in a plot-point moment, reveal a truly evil face by grabbing the gullible Farrago and using him as a human shield while he escapes into the setting sun.

But if their partnership is genuine and their motives good, they must somehow outwit the VPs and reinstall a leadership now benevolent and fully descended from the ivory tower. True, a happy ending is expected of broad comedy, but the unresolved nature of this one leaves a nagging question: How can a good man overstay his allotted time and remain admirable? Does he atone or repent, to show he has learned something? He cannot act as though nothing had happened.

If the employees are to accept the reinstatement of the old order, they will need to exhibit more moral ambiguity throughout. This is difficult when all the obedient, lower-level employees have been killed off, leaving only the middle-management greedies. Kill off all your good guys in battle, and you strain credibility if you make the bad guys go through a conversion. Life is seldom like that, and comedy never.

Another ending would be for Farrago and the president to contrive an escape and run off into the sunset together to start a new company somewhere else. This is both true to comedy's happy endings and to villainy in corporate life, but it violates a central assumption of the piece—that the corporation is an enclosed world where struggle is unto death. The genre you choose, the setting in which you play out your morality tale, all set the expectations the characters must navigate.

In summary, Farrago's briefing for his heroic journey and his journey from

the basement up to the heights and back down to the lobby are viable as they stand. His journey through the labyrinth needs building up, and the dying guard needs to be more ambiguous. The ordeal in the president's office could use more steps, tension, and uncertainty—particularly as the president later exudes nothing but quiet goodness. And the denouement in the lobby needs reworking.

My suggestions are only a few of the development possibilities, and it's important to recognize that they are only my solution. Others would probably suggest different developments. Any critic would however try to raise the stakes for Farrago, giving him more to contest, more obstacles to get past, and more hard choices to make.

This already represents a lot of development, and might easily expand the story far beyond the allotted thirty minutes.

Example 2: "Eggs Benedict" (Michelle Arnove)

Summary. "Eggs Benedict" is a bittersweet comedy about a struggling student, Meg Benedict. Under severe financial difficulties, she goes to a fertility center and donates one of her eggs to the bank in exchange for funds.

A young couple, Kevin and Mary Donovan, who are having difficulty becoming pregnant, visit the fertility center and opt to go the route of artificial insemination, hence Meg's egg. Two years later all is well until Mary is tragically killed in a terrible auto accident. Kevin is devastated, but is showered with love and affection by his family and friends who try to help him overcome his deep sorrow. Approximately three years later, Kevin becomes obsessed with thoughts of the semi-biological mother of his child and sets out to locate her. Through a series of channels, he is led to Meg and finds her single, attractive, and not interested in anything other than her hard-hitting career in journalism. His intentions are not initially romantic, but after he meets up with Meg, he is overcome with attraction and lust. Confused and afraid, he manages to befriend her, but under false pretenses. It is not until after a few encounters that Kevin discloses his real reasons for pursuing Meg—leaving her at first angry and confused, then finally enchanted by Kevin

and the baby. The rest is history …

Meaning/Purpose of the Story. The story's underlying meaning and purpose suggest, again, destiny and the idea that life and death are cyclical. Although Mary's death is tragic, the birth of the baby and the eventual meeting of Kevin and Meg are inevitable. While their meeting is not accidental, the events that lead up to it suggest a sort of fate, and this lends an enlightening feeling that "accidents" and the unexpected don't always mean a truly negative outcome.

Shopping List of Sequences

1 INT. MEG'S APARTMENT: Meg is preoccupied with worries. She locates articles from magazines describing fertility clinics and egg donation—7 minutes.

2 EXT. FERTILITY CLINIC: Meg hesitates entering the clinic—2 minutes.

3 INT. CLINIC: As Meg is leaving, she passes Kevin and Mary in lobby, however neither party sees the other—2 minutes.

"TWO YEARS LATER"

4 MARY LEAVES HOUSE—1 minute.

5 MARY'S CAR ACCIDENT—1 minute.

6 INT. KEVIN AND MARY'S HOME: Kevin is in mourning—2 minutes.

7 INT. MEG'S OFFICE: Meg gets phone call regarding a tip on a great story—2 minutes.

8 EXT. OUTDOOR CAFE: Meg meets Kevin—3 minutes.

9 EXT. MONTAGES: Kevin and Meg walk the city, have dinner, take a drive together—6 minutes.

10 INT. KEVIN'S HOME: Kevin writes a letter to Meg—2 minutes.

11 EXT. MEG'S FRONT DOOR: Kevin arrives and Meg greets him with affection—2 minutes.

Approximate time: 30 minutes.

Here's another comedy. Its materials however are quite sketchy, especially the sequence list, where Michelle leaves out the all-important baby material.

Nevertheless, the writing is promising, and comes, I think, from the heartfelt comments she makes on the story's underlying philosophy, for which comedy does make an excellent vehicle. Life, she says, is cyclical and Fate exacts a rough justice: what is taken away in one place will be given back in another.

Michelle calls her comedy bittersweet, and does so advisedly, for quite early she kills off one of her main characters. This may be problematic, since it looks as though the author is resorting to coincidence to crank up the pressure on her central character. Since this is not black comedy, there is also a genre problem. A death in a romantic comedy is risky, though not unknown. In a *Seinfeld* episode, George manages inadvertently to *kill* his fiancée, and the audience finds it hilarious. Their laughter, however, probably depends on loyalties and expectations built up over the length of the series.

Could Michelle's story arrive at the same consequences by less extreme means? If Mary were flighty from the beginning, she might return to an earlier love and leave Kevin holding the baby meant to save their marriage. By making her exit a character issue rather than one of mortality, Michelle could avoid an awkward transition. Now Kevin can compensate for Mary's abdication by seeking a replacement mother, a test he must pass with credit if we are to continue liking him. But if Mary were to die, then we'd want him to go through all the Kubler-Ross stages of loss to show he was a decent human being. This is far from funny stuff, and would hold up the story's central purpose—which is to get a father searching for his child's biological mother. So, I think we can confidently suggest that Mary abscond rather than expire.

The rest of the movie has no insuperable difficulties since it's really a variation on the chase, with the quarry having the upper hand and the hunter having to use charm, ingenuity, and the secret weapon of their baby as bait.

Central to the story is putting Meg's concept of herself as an independent-minded feminist under test by confronting her with the primal lure of motherhood. Before she fully knows what has hit her, she must decide between head and heart, between career and motherhood. The catch? That she cannot have her child unless she accepts its father and her role as the mother in a family.

Now we know where the story wants to go, we can divide it up and

speculate about what else it needs:

Act I

The first phase builds pressures on the main characters and reveals their characters through showing how they act under duress. Meg needs to survive economically in order to achieve her promising career. We know it matters because she has done something extreme—selling a part of her body and lineage. Kevin and Mary need a child, but if Mary leaves, Kevin is left as a single dad. The primal need for a mate drives him to seek the child's biological mother.

Act II

Now Kevin's problem is clear, the film can turn the tables of gender by making him the compulsive nest builder. Kevin must attempt to corral Meg, and Meg must resist mightily. That's the satisfaction of this piece. Though its outcome is probably inevitable, the author must keep us and Kevin guessing as long as possible. How? Maybe Meg is a promising journalist following the best story of her career. Maybe Kevin first hides their baby in the mistaken idea that it will alienate her, when in fact it's his best argument. Maybe Meg, in writing up her story, declares feminist principles or ideas that make Kevin's plans seem hopeless.

At all costs, the story must maintain the duel between their conflicting needs; ideally it should escalate all the way to the movie's major crisis point—where Meg realizes that Kevin's delightful baby is actually hers too.

Every story has its own needs and identity. You must give birth to a story before you can know it and see where it wants to go. Advance by trying a lot of "What if …" ideas. Serving your tale and doing its bidding is the author's private delight.

To raise the stakes, maybe the story Meg is pursuing is about surrogate parenthood, and by an irony her journalism uncovers that the baby of the man so relentlessly following her is actually her own. This offers deliciously serpentine plot possibilities, and a turning point at which the baby's charm seduces Meg and compels her into making an about-turn.

Plot is the mold that shapes its contents. Plot episodes form a chain of cause and effect that forces the characters into antagonistic struggles. Making every scene follow inevitably from the last takes much ingenuity.

Act III

If Mary were absent rather than dead, another irony becomes possible: after Meg and Kevin have come together, Mary could return, only to discover she has forfeited her place as Kevin's wife. The final question might then be, can Kevin and Meg be large-hearted enough to accommodate her late desire to see the child that the three of them made? Now you have a truly modern romance.

Willpower is the powerhouse of drama, no matter whether comedy, tragedy, or fantasy. Most characters have to struggle with whatever bars them from getting what they think they want.

On Comedy

Be aware of how point of view is handled in the stories you encounter. Michelle's tale anticipates the assignment in our next chapter by having two POV characters, neither of whom predominates.

Know your characters and their worlds. Fiction fails when writer, director, or actors engage only superficially with the main characters. Knowing them means you delve tirelessly into their every aspect and issue. Do this thoroughly, and it really shows.

To use your characters' full potential, you have to explore them exhaustively, which takes persistent, dedicated work. Comedy needs this, especially when character-driven. Your characters need heightened risks and dangers so they can struggle meaningfully for what they believe or need. When their struggles are interesting and compelling, someone will change and develop in a significant way. Laughter from your audience is the reward

currency for getting this right.

Story development is the task of adjusting each element—character, motive, situation, escalation, crisis, and resolution—in relation to the others. Only then will each sequence maintain its tension and resolve into the next, and the next. It takes many drafts before demanding readers agree that the piece is optimal. The most demanding of all forms is comedy.

Every story, no matter what genre or form of representation it takes, builds to its climax through maintaining a tension between individual and moral forces. A developed story is one in which the characters and their identity, motives, and actions exist within a balance of pressures that all feel right, all feel *inevitable* in relation to each other. Without this balance, the audience knows the central situation cannot hold up. If Kevin ever sees that courting Meg is a losing proposition, for instance, the story is dead in the water.

Though life is full of the far-fetched, coincidental, and inexplicable, art must work hard to use these factors yet remain credible. Comedy is the hardest taskmaster of all, since there is so little margin for error or inequity. This makes writing it fascinating, exacting, and fulfilling.

As your piece begins to make sense throughout, you feel the thrill of doing a demanding job well.

Pacing

As a genre, comedy moves faster than real life because we expect the characters to be larger than life, funnier, more inventive, and quicker witted. An oversupply of the comedic insures against the inevitable fluctuations of quality, but you don't necessarily want to make your audience drink from a firehose. Thus, if you direct a comedy, you are wise to shoot it in such a way that you have much control over pacing during editing. You also cover yourself by trying out a fine cut on a variety of audiences. Where you must speed or slow the pace is critical in movie making. In the theatre, actors can sense the audience's response time and alter their pacing accordingly.

Note

1 Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), Chapter 7, p. 89.

Going Further

Available at the website www.routledge.com/cw/rabiger are the following additional assignments: **Assignment 20–2: An Original Thirty-Minute Piece Inspired by an Image** and **Assignment 20–3: An Original Thirty-Minute Piece Inspired by CLOSAT Cards**. Books on short films and screenwriting are:

Cooper, Pat and Ken Dancyger. *Writing the Short Film*, 3rd ed., Butterworth-Heinemann, 2004 (Like poetry in relation to prose, writing the short story is in some ways harder than the long, and this book helps you grapple with it. Their explanation of dramatic concepts complements mine).

Cowgill, Linda J. *Writing Short Films: Structure and Content for Screenwriters.* 2005 (Undoctrinaire guide to writing short films of substance, with special attention to plot and structure. Cites examples that you can find and view).

Dancyger, Ken and Jeff Rush. *Alternative Scriptwriting: Beyond the Hollywood Formula.* Butterworth-Heinemann, 2013 (Very accessibly written. Explores what is possible in the nontraditional short form, working with and against genre, character distinctions and limits, and controlling tone. Plenty of writing samples).

Gurskis, Daniel. *The Short Screenplay: Your Short Film from Concept to Production.* 2006 (Good all-around industry information for those meaning to make a mark in film festivals, a strategy I strongly recommend).

Munroe, Roberta Marie. *How Not to Make a Short Film: Secrets from a Sundance Programmer.* 2009 (How to avoid run-of-the-mill by someone who's seen it all. Short films take all the thought and artistry of long ones, which is why good ones make excellent calling cards).

21 Feature Film

Everyone dreams of hitting the jackpot by writing a successful feature screenplay, but even in barest outline it's a big undertaking. Keeping an audience enthralled for ninety minutes will eventually take richly detailed characters, and a plot with a plethora of events and subplots. Themes have to develop, connect, and achieve a depth of meaning. Writing a complete, finished feature screenplay takes nearly the effort, narrative material, and planning that it takes to write a novel.

We shall only go to the foot of the mountain, but to make an initial outline is still significant and exciting. Where the thirty-minute fiction assignment asked you to explore the experience of one character, this asks that you:

- Depict the quests and development of two characters, making each equally interesting.
- Make your audience sympathize with at least one point of view to which you, personally, are opposed.

> *"Nothing human is alien to me."*[1] It takes a big heart to accept as human everything that humans do. It means embracing even what is antithetical to your own values and treating it respectfully, sympathetically, and unjudgmentally. When this starts from the intellect, your heart eventually catches up with your head.

This requires that as you write, you depart from the norm by no longer identifying exclusively with one character. Instead, you work at inhabiting two different characters, imagining their perceptions from the inside, even those that are imperfect or odious. Being able to enter all shades and conditions of human life is now your job, as a battlefield surgeon's is to heal friend and foe equally well (see sidebar, "Nothing human is alien to me.")

Assignment 21–1: Idea for a Feature Film (Featuring Two Points of View)

For your presentation, write:

Step 1: Treatment in scene-outline form.
Step 2: Definition of the themes handled by your story.
Step 3: A "shopping list" of sequences and their approximate timings, which should add up to about ninety minutes.

Discussion

In developing your feature film idea, you might include:

- What does this story make you feel at a gut level?
- What genre does this story belong in and how well does it exploit this?
- What moral forces is the story handling and what thematic work may it be trying to do?
- What do its two central characters represent within the film's cosmos?
- Are the stakes raised as high as they might be for each central character?
- Are the obstacles that each faces optimal for showing what each is made of?
- What is the story's crisis, and how do you feel about it?
- Does anyone develop, and if so, how does it happen, and is it credible and satisfying?
- Are the two characters receiving evenhanded treatment?
- How would you rate the originality of the story?
- How would you rate its overall impact for a general audience?

Example

What follows is historical fiction, a genre we have not encountered before. As you will see, many fascinating issues make the discussion a lengthy one.

Example: Feature Film Idea (Paul Flanagan)

Treatment Outline. Henry, a hefty nineteen-year-old tobacco farmer, and John, a twenty-one-year-old loner, stand before the Colonel inside a tent in Delaware. They have just joined the United States army in hope of assisting the American Revolution. They stand at attention as the Colonel sits behind his desk and begins to speak. He talks to them about the tough times that lie ahead, and the state of affairs in the rebellion. It is December 29, and General George Washington and his

troops are suffering bitterly in their encampment in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. They are freezing, have minimal food, and practically no clothes. They are also without their flag, for it was lost during a scuffle in Brandywine. Due to its utmost importance, the Colonel instructs Henry and John to deliver the flag to Washington in Valley Forge. The soldiers stand motionless as the Colonel dismisses them.

John and Henry are in their tent packing their belongings. John clearly doesn't want the mission. It doesn't involve battle. Henry isn't crazy about it either but he knows his time to fight will come, and he might as well follow orders.

The boys arrive in Philadelphia and walk through the city. John, completely lost, follows Henry, who seems to know his way around. The busy streets and vendors hurry them along as they scoot around a corner and arrive at their destination.

The two boys stand firmly in a very prim and proper home. Everything is polished clean and in its proper place. An elderly woman, Betsy Ross, appears with a folded American flag in her hand. They exchange some pleasant conversation, Henry throws the flag into a satchel, and they politely leave.

With the flag in their possession, Henry and John make their way out of the city and into the vast countryside ahead. They walk along for what seems like hours, talking to each other and trying to keep up enthusiasm. Henry walks while slowly slinging the satchel by his side, once bumping it into a tree and not taking notice.

They arrive at a large creek and stop at its edge. John, knowing that they must go across, reluctantly begins walking through the waist-high water. Upset at having to get wet, he makes his way across as quickly as possible. Henry follows, yelling at John for taking him through the water.

Once through, Henry questions John's navigational skills and they argue. Exhausted, they make camp for the night. Henry, sitting close to the fire, heats some food while John paces around the area. Henry, not being able to get comfortable, uses the satchel as a seat cushion. With

the food cooked, John sits down and joins him. They eat their food and cover themselves as warmly as they can for the night.

Awake at the crack of dawn, John pops up. He scopes the area looking for their direction of travel. Uh oh! They've been going the wrong way. He wakes Henry, and John, now carrying the flag, is not any more protective of it. They climb hills, move through ditches and more creeks, until John finally collapses. To hell with this! And John tosses the satchel away. They've been tearing themselves up. John doesn't move from the ground. He's too numb from the cold and just doesn't give a damn. Two good men wasted on a stupid delivery mission. Henry picks up the flag, keeping their orders in mind, but sits down also. A moment passes as they can barely control their shivering. Uh! What was that? Redcoats! John and Henry stagger to their feet and take off. In thick woods, they are stumbling over just about everything. Whack! John runs into a branch. They keep running with their muskets at the ready. John is shot in the arm from behind. He falls. No use. They are surrounded.

Captured. They are beaten up, harassed, and taken away after a few minutes to a small British camp. They practically walked right into it. Tied to two trees, the boys are thoroughly questioned by one of the commanders as to the whereabouts of Washington. They keep their mouths shut.

Their muskets and gear have been stripped from them and laid to the side. The men go through the soldiers' belongings and find the flag. All hell breaks loose as the men tauntingly hold up the flag, swirl and throw it around. One in particular wraps himself in it and rolls on the ground.

John and Henry, feeling something they haven't felt before, grapple with their ropes. Henry can almost get free, and he would, if only a soldier didn't coincidentally shove a musket at his knees. Eventually the mocking ends, the flag is dropped, and they are left for the night.

Night arrives and Henry breaks free and unties John. They grab the flag, any food they can find, and deftly flee. Scared, they run and run

and run. John looks deathly ill from his arm. He can't even move it. They spend a freezing night awake up against a tree.

The next morning they slowly begin walking along. They come upon a log cabin secluded in the woods. Before they get to the front step, they have a musket pointed at their heads. It's a young woman, Clair. John shocked by the gun, starts dribbling tears down his cheeks. Seeing the wound, Clair lowers the musket and brings them inside.

The home is amply furnished, and in exquisite taste. There is an American flag in the background on the wall. Three young children, around ten years old, surround the men. A not-as-tough-as-he-looks teenager is standing in the corner with a musket at his side.

Clair and the children tend to the wound and wrap both men in blankets. After a small meal, Henry and John explain what they are doing and what had happened. They learn that Washington and his troops passed by in the fall and that Clair actually met him. Seeing the soiled and bloody flag, Clair exchanges hers for theirs. If it's going to be taken to General Washington it must be clean.

At daybreak they leave. Henry helps John along. John babbles about being home, and how he wishes he could stay at Clair's.

Only slightly rejuvenated, they trudge along. Snow begins falling, and after a few miles' walking it's near a foot deep. Able to go no further, they halt. At the edge of the Brandywine River they sit and freeze. Henry, spotting shelter across the river in what appears to be an overhanging rock, gets up. It's likely they'll die from the cold water, but it will definitely happen if they stay where there are. After a quick look of mutual despair, they begin crossing the fast-moving current. Half way through Henry falls. Struggling to his feet, he realizes that he doesn't have the satchel. It's being swept away by the current! Henry darts after it.

John gets to solid ground and runs along the side. Snow is coming down fast. Henry goes under. John can't find him.

He jumps in! Searching, reaching, reaching, he's got an arm. He swims and pulls. They pull up on the bank on the other side and get

under the rock. Stretched out, they look at each other—motionless. Their belongings are lost. Their flag is gone. Near death and freezing, night comes.

John and Henry awaken on their backs. Wrapped in blankets they are being carried on stretchers. They were right outside Valley Forge and didn't know it.

The area looks like hell. People are freezing, dead, or dying. The two men are brought into the camp and into shelter. The troops watch in amazement as they see these two men who survived the past night carried in. The troops tend to Henry and John and both, almost frozen to death, pass out.

The next morning John wakes up with no one else around but Henry. He wakes him and they eat the food laid out for them. Neither talk. They didn't bring the flag. John gets up and walks to the opening of the tent. He stands there, motionless. Henry notices a change in John and finally speaks. He makes his way over to see what John is looking at. The men of Valley Forge have made their own flag—from the clothes off their backs.

A few of the themes being handled are:

- The boys' journey into manhood. The entire story is symbolic of this.
- Themes of hope and struggle. The boys are up against unbelievable odds and are struggling all the way. The troops of Valley Forge are also struggling, for they are suffering in one of the worst winters ever.
- The theme of hope is also present in that the troops make their own flag in the end, taking the clothes off their backs in order to have something to fight for.
- There are also themes of compassion—compassion that Clair has for them, and compassion they have for each other.

Shopping List of Sequences

1 In the tent receiving orders—10 minutes.

2 Packing belongings and heading out of town—5 minutes.
3 Arriving in Philadelphia and getting the flag from Betsy Ross—10 minutes.
4 First day's journey into the woods. They cross the creek—15 minutes.
5 First night's camp. They cook food, argue, and shiver—5 minutes.
6 They wake up and continue the second day. John is carrying the flag—5 minutes.
7 John stumbles and wants to give up—5 minutes.
8 Redcoat chase scene—5 minutes.
9 They are captured and taken back to the British camp. Entire camp scene—15 minutes.
10 They escape from the British—5 minutes.
11 Night camp—5 minutes.
12 They arrive at Clair's home and are taken in—10 minutes.
13 They leave and lose the flag in the river—10 minutes.
14 They are taken into Valley Forge and are tended to—10 minutes.
15 They wake up the next morning and see the handmade flag—5 minutes.

Approximate time: 120 minutes.

The strength of this idea is that it's an archetypal journey film, with a series of rite-of-passage tests that the two must pass, or their mission will abort. For me, the premise is, "Fire is the test of gold; adversity, of strong men."[2] Like their own emerging nation, these untried, rural partners—"revolutionaries" to fellow Americans, "insurgents" to the exasperated colonial British—must endure a descent into privation and disappointment on their way toward maturity.

Let's say it again: *good drama poses questions.* By artfully involving us in its characters' predicaments, it gets us to care how they deal with a

succession of problems. Drama exists to draw us into exercising our faculties and judgment. Thus we rehearse for crises in our own lives.

We can ask what questions the piece poses. This lifts its function from exposition (undramatic information) to options and dilemmas. Here, most scenes take shape as tests of John and Henry's strength, persistence, and ingenuity:

a. *Taking the challenge*—Can these two raw recruits carry out the task?
b. *Manners*—Can these country bumpkins behave properly in a lady's living room, and can they make their way through the big city?
c. *Endurance*—Are they equal to the endless trek through the wintry countryside, especially when soaked and freezing after fording the creek?
d. *Cooperation*—Can they agree about navigation and on the worth of their purpose?
e. *Ingenuity*—Can they make a meal and improvise a modicum of comfort?
f. *Endurance*—Will they persist with their mission once they become lost and exhausted?
g. *Loyalty*—Under the British taunts and bullying, can they keep silent about Washington's whereabouts, especially with John wounded and vulnerable?
h. *Ingenuity*—Are they resourceful enough to escape from their uncouth captors?
i. *Endurance*—Can their bodies and spirits survive the worsening cold, when John becomes seriously ill?
j. *Luck*—When they evade their pursuers, do they deserve to find a haven?
k. *Pride*—Can John recover from the embarrassment of crying in front of a woman?
l. *Paradise lost*—Can they leave Clair's sanctuary and return to the comfortless world of their mission, especially with John disintegrating emotionally?

m. *Endurance*—Can they go through one more river—a truly dangerous one—with shelter on the other side uncertain?
n. *Failure*—After they nearly die in the river and lose the precious flag, can they find any reason to go on?
o. *Grace*—Can they overcome the disillusioning fact that their mission was never necessary?

Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (USA, 1941) made Kane's sled "Rosebud" the key to all that the newspaper magnate Kane lost in childhood. Paul's film works inversely: its homemade flag is the public emblem of statehood and independence. By safely conveying it, the two boys help defy their unworthy motherland and put their colony on the path to nationhood.

A flag is something young men will die for, so Paul makes a nice comment when their emblem becomes a cushion; is nearly abandoned; gets muddied and bloodied; is desecrated by the enemy; and ultimately lost in the river. Particularly ironic is that all the boys' suffering turns out to be needless. The film's resolution is its parting thought—that what must "get through" is the symbol's meaning, not any actual or particular emblem.

Figurative language. Search the world of your story for visual elements able to connote abstract ideas (Figure 21–1). Key objects and images can give visible form to what might remain subtextual. Such poetic language includes:

- Symbol—something material that by convention represents an abstract idea (falling sand = time running out)
- Metaphor, or imaginative analogy (shot of traffic *cut to* medical diagram of blood circulation)
- Simile, which likens one thing to another (politician deflecting complaints *cut to* water running off duck's back)
- Emblem, representing things (two snakes entwined with a dagger used to represent medical expertise)

Paul has allowed excessive time for some sequences. The first gets five minutes—but try closing your eyes and visualizing the boys getting their

orders. A static, expositional scene like this might run only a tenth of that time. Commonly a first draft lacks depth and detail, and can only hint at the thematic potential we anticipate.

Also not yet present is individuality for each of the boys, John and Henry. So little are they differentiated that they could be rolled into one with no great loss. The subsidiary characters they encounter also remain flat characters, in particular Clair. Such lack of dimension is normal enough for a beginning outline.

Figure 21–1 The worn-out, overloaded vehicles in *The Grapes of Wrath* (USA, 1940) become metaphors for humankind's uncertain progress through misfortune (frame from the film).

Paul could get a lot more mileage from his protagonists by working on their contrasting temperaments, histories, and needs. Imagine that John is married and longs for his wife and baby at home. If Henry were single, he could start out envious, withdrawn, and anxious about ever finding a mate. He could along the way become deeply attracted to Clair, whom we'd make unavailable just to "up the ante" (raise the stakes). Let's also experiment by giving them

mismatched personalities, one man being "can-do" headstrong, and the other cautious to excess. This will charge the space between them so that with every new predicament they madden each other. Because some circumstances require speed of response, and others careful premeditation, each can eventually learn to value the qualities of the other.

Complications no more remarkable than these will generate issues and conflicts characteristic of men in their formative years and provide the *complications* needed in Act II. Maturing—the point of this story—means sharing, learning from others, and seeing them as equals even when they are unlike yourself.

Complications in a dramatic plot are the difficulties, obstacles, and distractions that expose a person's characteristics under duress. Most of what we learn in life, we learn the hard way, a truth useful to comedy and tragedy alike.

By developing them, we begin to look not just at them, but *through* their way of seeing. We see how John sees Henry, and how Henry sees John. Instead of a settled, neutral, omniscient authorial view, we should sink alternately into each man's present and share his dilemmas and feelings. This would bring us close to all the quandaries, frustrations, and rewards of real living.

Since we're making art, not a simulacrum of life, everything must be pared down to what is succinct and fast-moving. The playwright Arthur Miller's first drafts were said to be more than double their final length, which Miller reached by a long period of editing and compression.

A *subplot* is an independent storyline that will eventually intersect with one already existing. It may contrast with the main plot, complement it, or provide more action and complication. Subplots allow:

- Digression. Situations, characters, and other issues can develop outside the main storyline. Because we see the main characters in other relationships, we also see new sides to them.

- Tension. The audience engages with characters and issues that may either become germane, or may prove a "red herring."

Parallel storytelling permits:

- Narrative compression. By cutting between ongoing storylines you can pare each to essence.
- Imagination. Multiple storylines invite the audience to exercise judgment, interpretation, and powers of prediction.
- Active participation. Any story generating unanswered questions invites the audience to become active participants, not passive receptacles.

Short films and short stories usually focus on a single main character, but the novel and the feature film can develop a tapestry of characters and *subplots*. D. W. Griffith said he learned to weave together concurrent storylines from the novels of Charles Dickens (Figure 21–2). Called *parallel storytelling*, this sprightly technique lets the storyteller condense time and yet also create comparison, variety, and pace.

Can we try this here? Presently we see the boys together in nearly every scene, but subplots could separate them and show them in relation to other characters. There could be authorially generated subplots involving subsidiary characters alone. For instance:

- Betsy Ross making her flag *intercut* with the two young men getting their orders.
- Clair saying goodbye to her husband.
- The announcement of her husband's death that makes Clair a widow.
- Clair's life after the young men have left *intercut* with their journey onward.
- Washington's troops losing their flag, then carrying on, suffering and flagless.
- Washington's men shivering as they rip apart their clothing for some unspecified purpose—later revealed to have been the making of their own flag.

Figure 21–2 D. W. Griffith learned some of the storytelling techniques in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) from reading Dickens (frame from the film).

Parallel storytelling helps, but doesn't overcome, the concentration on the two main characters. So let's look for advantages: maybe the point of the film should be *not* allowing us to escape from the heroes' shared predicament. That might rule out subplots. This, after all, is a road movie, so why not stay with them on the road? Certainly their experiences can be intensified, and more historical research will assuredly bring more possibilities. It could aim to get the period, speech, and political issues so authentic that even a historian could applaud.

On Receiving Criticism and the Layers of the Writing Process

Since we are critiquing a writer's first draft, we would stop here. Paul would listen, make notes, and go away to ponder the ideas behind the suggestions. He would be wise to do absolutely nothing for a few days, and then to incorporate only the ideas left standing in his mind as persuasive and exciting.

Writers engage mainly in *re*writing, one layer at a time. In any new draft, it

is wise never to deal with more than the topmost layer of problems. Especially if you overreact to criticism, you can easily dive into a frenzy of wholesale changes and unwittingly forfeit the artistic integrity of your piece. An artist must hold tenaciously to the original idea's integrity. To help yourself do this, write an updated working hypothesis before any big critical session. This anchors you to a rock when the waves break over you.

Writing is really about rewriting. Some tips:

- In a new draft, don't try to fix everything. Fix only the top level of problems.
- Stay with these until you get them right. There will always be subsidiary layers of problems, and eventually your attention will fan out to the finer details.
- Periodically review your working hypothesis, or you won't realize how your work's fundamentals have changed.
- Be ready to stop. If you're making no progress, do something else until you can return with a fresh eye and renewed energy.
- Keep earlier drafts in case you need them. Perfectionism is only a hair's breadth from obsessive compulsive disorder. Writers unable to stop often mutilate their work.

An artwork is like a tent: alter just one guy-rope, and the canopy will remain distorted until you have adjusted all the others. A dramatic work is similar, and you adjust it by posing questions and tackling deficiencies, layer by layer, until you come as close as you can to a harmonious whole.

Why Working in Outline Form Matters

Working as long as possible in outline forces you to drive your storytelling forward by visual and behavioral means, no matter what medium you intend to work in. Scene outlines exclude dialogue, so the characters must establish themselves by their actions, appearances, and emerging agendas. This emphasis is not peculiar to film, which gained its ascendency during the silent era. Literary works also gain from demonstrative actions and minimal dialogue from their characters. Small wonder that Charles Frazier's Civil

War–period novel *Cold Mountain*, about a wounded Confederate soldier making a Homeric return to the love of his life, became a film within six years (Figure 21–3), and then an opera.

Notes

1 Terence, Roman poet c. 195–159 BC.

2 Lucius Seneca (4 BC–AD 65).

Going Further

For help expanding your best outlines into their full form, see Part VI Developing as a Writer, in particular Chapter 25 Expanding to the Finished Product. There is much interesting discussion on the Internet about screenwriting, and for more debate and dialogue try www.cyberfilmschool.com/. Use its many links to jump off to related sites.

Figure 21–3 Charles Frazier's 1997 novel *Cold Mountain* was made into a film in 2003 and then an opera in 2015 (frame from the film).

In the meantime, develop your own work, and rely on your instincts and common sense as long as possible. Then pick your authorities *very* carefully! Buy no manual without double-checking that you like its tone and scope.

Here are most of the best-regarded screenwriting books, as well as my book, cowritten with Mick Hurbis-Cherrier, on the whole fiction filmmaking process.

Most of these screenwriting manuals are classics that have earned their longevity.

Blacker, Irwin R. *Elements of Screenwriting: A Guide for Film and Television Writing*. Reissued 1996.

Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives.* 2009 (Originally written in the 1950s for playwrights, but highly regarded by screenwriters too).

Field, Syd. *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting.* Revised and updated, 2005 (Field was regarded as the screenwriting guru, and his books are bracing, to the point, and Hollywood oriented).

Horton, Andrew. *Writing the Character-Centered Screenplay.* 2000 (A manual that bucks the trend toward plot-driven drama and concentrates on character and character issues).

Hunter, Lew. *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434.* Perigee, 2004 (Hollywood screenwriting at its most intelligent and purposeful, with an emphasis on enjoying the process of writing).

Rabiger, Michael and Mick Hurbis-Cherrier. *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, 5th ed., 2013 (Essentials of the entire fiction filmmaking process, including writing from the viewpoint of actor, director, and screenwriter. Sections of the book—on how actors control the inner lives of their characters, for instance—will be especially relevant. In the three chapters of Part 3: The Director and the Script [pp. 75–114] we elaborate on the qualities and importance of a first-class script).

Vale, Eugene. *Vale's Technique of Screenwriting.* 1998 (Another classic, with an emphasis on screenwriting as an audience-oriented science).

Part V

Creating Collaboratively

This part offers two experiments in collaborative authorship, a road less traveled than writing solo. In the latter, the characters and their world often suffer because they all emerge from the sensibility of a single individual. Much durable art has in fact come about by other means. For thousands of years people created stories, plays, and epic poetry collectively, without designated writers or directors. Greek mythology, Norse sagas, and Arthurian legends were all the work of many hands, and the results retain their power today, exercising a powerful influence in all aspects of our culture. Today's equivalent of collaborative writing can be seen in "devised theatre," which is reexploring the grassroots compositional methods. Here is what one participant found:

> Without a playwright, our ensemble faced the seemingly impossible task of creating a play from scratch with only a theme to guide us—and that theme is … missed connections…. For me, *Missed Connections* began with an audition and a series of improvisations…. We found ourselves sifting through hours of material. And finally, we have cobbled together an 80-minute show that asks the question: If you had one chance to be the person you always wanted to be, what would you do? The theme drove us, the company learned to communicate and compromise, and we created something exciting.[1]

Making films is a collaboration of specialists, but some directors have gone further by making exceptional use of their cast in the writing and conceptual processes. The assignments that follow offer two experiments in which you become a catalyst and editor rather than a conventional writer. These experiments seem to point toward theatre or cinema as their outcome, but the method can be used for memoir, fiction, and nonfiction too.

22 Catalyzing Drama

Today, vibrant cinema like Richard Linklater's Oscar-winning *Boyhood* (USA, 2014) is emerging from actor-centered generative methods rather than from the traditional screenwriter working alone. To chronicle a Texan boy growing up into a young man, Linklater shot at intervals over twelve years, using the same cast in improvised scenes. In the film, people age visibly and develop in mind, behavior, and relationship as well as physically. Most touching is the unfolding relationship between mother and son, for which Patricia Arquette received an Academy Award.

Actor-centered fiction film goes back many decades. Ingmar Bergman, who knew his actors well from directing them in the Swedish National Theatre, gave them a prominent place in the generative process when he took up filmmaking. Beginning from an idea or conviction, he would develop his questions, memories, and dreams into an annotated short story. This he gave to his actors as a spur to extended discussions and invention. From the actors drawing on their own lives and issues, characters and relationships came to life with the eerie intensity of lived experience. Then, to balance and focus the underlying metaphysics, Bergman would use his notes of the generated material and dialogue to write a full screenplay, one his players could wholeheartedly perform.

In the 1950s, the New York actor/director John Cassavetes, disaffected with the artificiality of Hollywood fiction, turned to improvising. Most originally, he believed that human character is not fixed, intrinsic, and waiting only to be revealed. Rather, it is something pliable and nascent that we negotiate into being through our emotional relationship with others.

At a time when drugs, alcohol, and psychiatry were prominent forces in New York life, Cassavetes sought to capture human truth through the extremes of confession and conflict. Using the new, highly portable film equipment developed for documentary, he made sprawling, intense, fractious works like *Shadows* (1959) and *Faces* (1968). Later, with a full film unit he made films like *A Woman under the Influence* (1974). Like all his works, it teems with raucous, passionate energy and is notable for moments of striking

human revelation.

See Cassavetes at work on YouTube directing his cast with charm, authority, and unyielding pressure in the documentary *A Constant Forge.*[2]

Assignments

The following two assignments approach scene generation differently, each aiming to lift the lid of Pandora's box for your interest. In the first, the director/writer moves from a thematic idea to a scene developed with the actors.

Assignment 22–1: From a Theme to a Scene Improvised with Actors

This assignment, in the spirit of Bergman and Cassavetes's compositional methods, makes use of the kind of ideas, memories, dreams, marks, and themes that you have been writing about in Part II, "The Roots of Invention."

Step 1: *Take a powerful "mark" left on you by your experience*, which you can divulge or keep private, and use it to generate a theme that you could apply in different ways (Examples: "the need to break out of a sense of imprisonment" or "beggars can't be choosers").

Step 2: *Work with two classmates assigned to you as potential actors*, and describe the kind of scene you'd like them to portray. Ask them to relate similar experiences, and develop ideas for a four-minute scene incorporating the best and most relevant of your actors' suggestions and associations.

Step 3: *Pitch the contents of your proposed scene*, then briefly describe its evolutionary process with your actors.

Assignment 22–2: From Actor-Generated Characters to a Scene with a Theme

Here the history, personality, and creativity of the cast helps the

director/writer to shape a character-driven story. The director asks actors about powerful characters they have known, then helps build the individual characteristics that, put together, create a clash of personalities.

Step 1: *The director is assigned (or chooses) two classmates as actors*, makes initial notes on characters they might play, ways they might differ, and issues over which they might clash.

Step 2: *The director now interviews each actor separately*, and asks for:

- Descriptions of three or four strong, influential characters in the actor's life
- Ideas about each character's main "problem" and agenda in life
- What the actor would concentrate on, were he/she playing that character

Step 3: *The director devises a situation and scene* after choosing the most promising character and their issues from each player. Together, actors and director/writer devise a scene of conflict that can be funny, sad, angry, or carry any other emotional connotation.

Step 4: *The director pitches the scene to the class*, and briefly describes its evolution and the perceived strengths or weaknesses of this particular story-making process.

The British film director Mike Leigh (another graduate of the theatre) chooses strong cast members, then works individually at getting impressions from each of a compelling acquaintance. By working for weeks or months with each cast member, Leigh helps ferment a cast of driven, highly individual, agenda-obsessed characters. Then he brings them together, directing improvisations that help clarify and intensify their characters' needs and differences. Transcribing the best material into a full script, Leigh uses his editorial sense of what will make good drama. During filming, he withholds important dramatic information from the actors, so they enter their scenes

uncertain about their content and direction, much as happens in life itself.

Leigh specializes in "ordinary" people living in obscure, neglected hinterlands. His films, which are full of wry humor and penetrating social observation, usually come to unpredictable and oddly cathartic conclusions. His tour de force is *Naked* (1993), an apocalyptic vision of the ravaged, despairing British underclass in Mrs. Thatcher's dog-eat-dog Britain of the 1980s. Quite different is *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008, Figure 22–1), a comedy in which incurable optimist Poppy blithely learns driving from Scott, a repressed driving instructor bristling with anger management issues. His eventual breakdown is a cinematic tour de force.

Figure 22–1 Happy-Go-Lucky: Cheerful optimist and control-freak driving instructor trapped in a car together (frame from the film).

Discussion

From your experience of collaborative story generation, what did you learn about:

- Who provided what in the different collaborations?
- Where can you see things going wrong, and how might participants rescue the situation?
- How did the process compare with individual methods of ideation?
- What did you take away from the experience?

Notes

1 Alexandra Desaulniers's blog entry 13 August 2012, describing her participation in a Washington, DC production

(http://theatrewashington.org/content/devised-theatre-art-impossible).

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lh0XuQaT88

Going Further

There is such an enormous bibliography on Ingmar Bergman that you should search online for whatever aspect of it—critical, biographical, psychological—particularly interests you. Information on Bergman's intensely private conceptual methods is, however, not at all easy to track down. The generative methods of John Cassavetes, Mike Leigh, and those used in devised theatre are well-documented.

Bicât, Tina and Chris Baldwin. *Devised and Collaborative Theatre: A Practical Guide.* 2002 (A detailed how-to for making non-text-based theatre production).

Carney, Ray. *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies.* 1994 (Impassioned explanation of Cassavetes's originality, particularly concerning the way he worked with actors to catalyze character development and revelation).

Carney, Ray. *The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World.* 2000 (The text weaves together Leigh's middle-class English background, his influences from working in the theatre, and his restrained use of cinematic language).

Jones, Edward Trostle. *All or Nothing: The Cinema of Mike Leigh.* 2004 (Critical study of thirty years of Leigh's filmmaking, with detailed discussion of individual films).

Linklater, Richard and Ethan Hawke. *Boyhood: Twelve Years on Film.* 2014 (The twelve-year process recalled by many of those taking part).

Orti, Pilar. *Devised and Collaborative Theatre: A Practical Guide.* 2014 (Another insight into the devising process, with students and theatre departments in mind).

Tharp, Twyla and Jesse Kornbluth. *The Collaborative Habit: Life Lessons for Working Together.* 2013 (Anecdotal discussion by the famous choreographer of the perils and rewards of working partnerships, and what makes them fruitful).

Part VI

Developing as a Writer

Telling and consuming stories is essential to becoming fully alive—which some writer, probably Henry Miller, once defined as "living your life as though telling a story."[1] What makes the act of writing extraordinary is that it allows the human mind to contemplate its own workings, then to surpass them. When my friend Lois Deacon said, "Nothing is real until I have written about it,"[2] she said a great deal, for writing lets you engage with life's riddles and recognize the substance of your own life. In a fascinating interview, the distinguished American novelist Paul Auster talks about writing and getting older:

> By the age of fifty, most of us are haunted by ghosts. They live inside us and we spend as much time talking to the dead as to the living. It's hard for a young person to understand this. It's not that a twenty year old doesn't know he's going to die, but it's the loss of others that so profoundly affects an older person—and you can't know what that accumulation of losses is going to do to you until you experience it yourself. Life is so short, so fragile, so mystifying. After all, how many people do we actually love in the course of a lifetime? Just a few, a tiny few. When most of them are gone, the map of your inner world changes. As my friend George Oppen once said to me about getting old: what a strange thing to happen to a little boy.[3]

Now that you are becoming a writer too, and have some work under your belt, you probably have a favorite outline you are itching to expand into a full work. Before you do that, I suggest a couple of preliminaries. One is to revisit and check your artistic identity; the other is to submit your outline to a final and very demanding quality check.

23 Artistic Identity and Career

In Part II of this book you made an initial self-survey and a conjectural profile of your artistic identity. Since then, doing this book's assignments has yielded hard evidence of those interests, characters, and predicaments that most intrigue you, as well as the genres you prefer. From solving a hundred practical problems, the pulse and bearing of your creative identity is now evident, so it's time for a review.

Assignment 23–1: Revisiting Your Artistic Identity

Step 1: Recapitulate the themes you tentatively identified in *Assignment 3–1: Making a Private Self-Inventory (Marks and Themes)*.

Step 2: Write a paper comparing them with the patterns and common denominators that emerged from your subsequent work. As a reminder, the assignments and their chapters were:

- A tale from childhood (Chapter 13)
- A family story (Chapter 14)
- A myth, legend, or folktale retold (Chapter 15)
- Dream story (Chapter 16)
- Adapting a short story for the screen (Chapter 17)
- Ten-minute, news-inspired story (Chapter 18)
- A documentary subject (Chapter 19)
- Thirty-minute original fiction (Chapter 20)
- Feature film (Chapter 21)

Assignment 23–2: Where I'm Going

Prepare outline notes on what you've discovered about your story preferences, then deliver a six-minute oral presentation. It may help to use these prompts:

- At the beginning, I listed my preferred themes as …

- From the work I produced, my main themes were …
- I think I want to make my audience realize …
- I am interested in making my audience feel …
- From what I have written, my emerging vision of life is …
- From working collaboratively with other writers I learned that …
- My next piece of writing will probably be … (briefly describe topic, genre, any particulars)

Discussion and Retrospective

It is time to look back over the ground you have covered, individually and as a group, and to draw conclusions in readiness to move onward. Try considering:

- What has most impressed you or changed you from doing the assignments?
- What most impressed you about the class/group process?
- What did you take from others that you'll use for yourself?
- What did you learn from writing the various short forms?
- What was different when you moved on to longer forms?
- What stands out about other people's artistic process in relation to your own?

On a Career as a Writer

Does the writer's life beckon to you? Could you make writing your work and use it to create the career you desire? If you answer yes, then you will probably first need other work to pay your bills. Most successful actors can point to chapters in their lives spent waiting tables or driving taxis. At the same time, they were in relationships, learning from life about the roles and characters they can play, and becoming seasoned adults. Writers learn in similar ways.

Who or what you "really are" should never concern you, since thankfully we are dynamic beings, constantly evolving and in negotiation. There is in any case no fast lane for writers, or for artists of any kind, since there is no accelerated path to becoming a full human being. Work diligently at your chosen art, lead a full life, and what you want will come—somehow,

somewhere.

Your Creative Direction

So where should you go next? What should you do with your enhanced writing skills? This is a fateful moment because many good people:

- Have hopes for their future but make no active plans
- Wait for schooling or a job to lead them
- Let chance decide what's next
- Avoid any specializing for fear of squelching other opportunities
- Take whatever work comes along, and fall in with surroundings and work never consciously chosen

At a vulnerable moment in their lives, many hunker down and let chance and circumstance decide their future. I speak not without rueful authority, since my own early life, and that of many of my peers, followed a similar path.

Some people think that talent makes people successful, and that if they believe in their own talent, others will recognize it in them. But this is a fantasy. Many years of watching students enter their professions has convinced me not in talent, but in the necessity of finding and developing one's potential. In the arts, as in every other sphere, you become good at something (and get paid to do it) because you have invested energy, courage, faith, and humor in your own development. In general, the person who shines at something:

- Envisions a desired outcome, then works to bring it into existence
- Is realistic about their current limitations, and has a plan to overcome them
- Enjoys the work's process as much as its outcome
- Can delay gratification
- Makes enthusiastic use of facilities, curriculum, mentors, and collaboration
- Uses networking to locate helpers and advice
- Seeks the energetic and ambitious as partners
- Is not dependent on peer approval

I suggest you avoid one rather seductive path—taking a favorite thematic

concern and writing to illustrate it. This usually leads to cramped morality lessons. However tempting it is to teach what you know, carrying it out becomes oddly sterile and tiring. The reason is simple: we are excited when we are in creative tension, and that only happens when we tackle what we *don't* know, never what we do.

But how, you ask, can I be sure that any theme or meaning will emerge if I pursue what I don't understand? I can only assure you that honest creative endeavor not only delivers your underlying concerns, it helps you advance in understanding them too. Keep working, keep your eyes open, and you will be surprised at what happens over time.

Notes

1 I have been unable to trace this, but seem to recall it from *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), Henry Miller's strongly autobiographical novel about his beginnings in New York, when struggling to find his voice as a writer.

2 Lois Deacon and Terry Coleman, *Providence and Mr. Hardy* (Hutchinson, 1966).

3 Paul Auster interviewed by Michael Wood in *Paris Review,* The Art of Fiction No. 178. (http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/121/the-art-of-fiction-no-178-paul-auster).

24 Story-Editing Your Outline

Having revisited your artistic identity, you can now think of finalizing your best outline. First, however, make a final pass at eliminating remaining problems, which the novice often assumes will disappear by expanding the outline into a full piece. Handcuff yourself to the nearest radiator and delay expanding it just a little bit longer, because there is some more very useful stuff to come.

Scene cards. Number each scene and gum its outline to a large index card. Line your scenes up on a table and experiment with moving, combining, and eliminating them.

Using Scene Cards

You can test an outline's viability by turning it into *scene cards* (see sidebar). These break your work into movable parts, each with its function, and become invaluable when you must pitch a complex project. Especially if you feel your audience is new to the project and skeptical, significant problems will step into the light of day.

Armed with scene cards at a story conference, you can concentrate on ideas and explanations. You can even invite your critics to rearrange the story and "talk through" an alternative version. This lets you consider structural alternatives on the spot, something only possible while the piece remains in compact outline.

Seeking Structural Options

Altering story structure brings various options into play. Try answering these questions:

- How does the piece handle time?
    - *Chronologically.* Screen time follows chronological order of events.
    - *Nonchronologically.* The story unfolds according to (a) how a character perceives or remembers events, or (b) the priorities of the film's storytelling method.

- Whose POV predominates?
    - *A character in the story*. If that person is like Forrest Gump or Scarlett O'Hara, their eccentricities or limitations can make their way of seeing revealingly subjective.
    - *Multiple viewpoints from several characters*. Useful for showing subjective differences between each person's perceptions.
    - *Omniscient*. The eye and ear of the film are privileged to go anywhere, and to see and hear everything and everybody. This "God's POV" is useful for epic stories whose complex events no single character can witness.

A linear story, like Chris Columbus's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), follows the order of Harry's journey. Chronological and nonchronological narratives are also called *linear* and *nonlinear* storylines, and their POV can vary according to whose mind-processes you nominate to organize the storytelling. Telling a linear or chronological story:

- Is logical and makes the fewest demands. This may help what is otherwise a complex or even fantastic storyline.
- Makes events seem objectively true, as if seen historically and from a distance.
- Has inbuilt limits, because transposing sequences may alter the apparent cause and effect of events.

You can use a "dream" or "memory" sequence to temporarily transport us back in time, or you can send us forward in time using an "imagination" or "what if" episode. However, unless you build the subjectivity of memory and imagination into the fabric of the piece, they will look like temporary narrative conveniences.

Rethinking POV Can Let You Alter the Handling of Time

If you change a chronologically told, omniscient POV story into one told through the conflicting, subjective perceptions of its two main characters, then you have a new version, different in every way. What do you gain; what do you lose? Nonlinear stories seem attractively haphazard, but are seldom so

because they usually conform to a logic of some kind. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001, Figure 24–1) conveys great immediacy and subjectivity, but it demands much—some say too much—of its audience. To decide "what really happened" we search afterward for whatever governed cause and effect. By what logic did events become so fragmented? Eventually one sees that the associative piecemeal of Lynch's tale must arise from the after-effects of Irene's amnesia.

Figure 24–1 A chaotic-seeming mystery like David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* derives its logic from a pattern the spectator must unravel (frame from the film).

The Significance of Transitions

Transitions from shot to shot or sequence to sequence function in different ways and their juxtapositions carry different meanings. They can represent:

- Continuity, that is, a cut between shots or sequences indicating a development in:
    - Information or exposition (series of shots showing the stages of demolishing a building, or cut from fledgling plants *to* vine with grapes ready to pick)
    - Action (man rises from chair *to* same man opens window so he can call out to a friend below)
    - Time (woman on bike *to* ambulance approaching emergency

department *to* woman on crutches)

- Comparison, that is, there is a special significance in comparing:
    - Actions (cut from A wiping his brow *to* B wiping his car windshield)
    - Images (cut from car headlights approaching at night *to* the eyes of a hunting cat)
    - Sounds (cut or dissolve from traffic sequence *to* roar of applause at a concert)
- Dialectical, that is, significant tension between conflicting:
    - Actions (river getting angry and swollen *cut to* townspeople desperately building sandbag dam).
    - Sounds (quiet woodland birdsong *cut to* roar of shipbuilding yard).
    - Moods (sergeant screaming at army recruits during drill *cut to* small boy industriously coloring a picture. Or, busy Christmas shoppers in a bright store *cut to* homeless people shivering under a dark parapet).
    - Scale and dimension (giant trucks *cut to* caterpillar crossing same highway).

You can also use scene cards to help you ponder the different associations created by cutting from one scene to another. The exquisite short film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (Robert Enrico, France, 1962) often contrasts frame designs or subject movements, and with these comparisons alone it easily sustains our interest. A longer piece usually needs a larger, enclosing design. The *nouvelle vague* (new wave) French novelists of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Michel Butor, made bold experiments in literary structure and texture, and the cinema has been equally inventive. Nicholas Roeg's mystery, *Don't Look Now* (1973, Figure 24–2) is a veritable dictionary of narrative and structural devices. It capitalizes on the way people under great psychological pressure hardly notice time or hunger while they struggle to comprehend the true order of events.

Figure 24–2 Don't Look Now, Nicholas Roeg's masterful storytelling set in the labyrinth of Venice (frame from the film).

Letting a Main Character's Psychic Condition Dictate the Narrative Order

Imagine a man realizing that his keys and wallet have disappeared from his briefcase. He does not chronologically recall the events since he last saw them. In a panic, his mind rushes to whatever is most important, and his body blindly carries out what his mind dictates. First, he bangs all his pockets looking for the missing items. Then he scours his memory for any moment when someone could have got into his briefcase. Provisionally he recalls three likely occasions, then reconstructs each occasion sketchily, in search of a quick and obvious answer. There being none, he scours each occasion in detail, making and correcting memory errors, recalling "might-have-been" moments and trying comparisons between possibilities. Triumphantly he then recalls someone sitting nearby who turned away with a strange expression. Could he be the culprit?

Emotion affects how we travel imaginatively through time, space, and

memory. It can block out much of the familiar world and create disorientation, or it can orient us along internally driven priorities. It can extend time (boredom from waiting for a nonexistent bus) or compress it (suddenly a wallet gone, man running for doorway, hero yells "Stop thief!"—someone tackles the thief but he breaks free …).

When subjectivity is so dominant, the sequence and rhythm of events become windows into the POV character's state of mind. In an action thriller like Andrew Davis's *The Fugitive* (1993, Figure 24–3), the torrent of action and reaction alone tells most of what we need to know about Dr. Richard Kimble's priorities, feelings, and vulnerabilities.

Figure 24–3 In a plot-driven story like *The Fugitive*, we understand the central character from the way he handles his predicaments (frame from the film).

Point of View and Stream of Consciousness

Despite the apparent objectivity of the camera, a screen story is really a stream of human consciousness, so that POV and apparent time are inextricably entwined. POV can originate in one character but migrate to another. In the storytelling itself, it can move around as we follow the mind (or collective of minds) that inhabit the film's vision of its world, and we can begin to think of this as the unseen storyteller's stream of consciousness. For every film implies a storyteller.

No story need be cast in the tedious chronological mold of mainstream realism. Structure and flow can instead arise from mood and context, association with similar stories, or from the logic of its characters, their psychology, or mood. Because *film is a reproduction of consciousness*, each character may be thinking and acting from differing inner or outer compulsions. The inner and outer may be in harmony, or they may be in conflict. The ultimate arbiter is the unseen storyteller whose hand creates the story itself. Try considering that:

- *The needs of the subject often suggest an appropriate form and structure:*
    - A period piece depending on a complicated historical setup may require you to launch some commanding action, then backtrack in time to establish characters, events, era, and backstory before the action proper can go forward.
    - A film about an archeologist might go chronologically backward, digging a metaphorical trench downward through layers of time, and coming to rest at some significant point of origin.
    - A surreal story about a psychopathic firefighter secretly setting buildings ablaze might employ nightmarish shifts between place, character, and mood.
    - A story about identical twins separated at birth might tell parallel stories to show serendipitously similar events before they meet for the first time.
- *Film language can juxtapose extremes*:
    - As a baffled psychiatrist trying to understand a soldier suffering post-traumatic hallucinations, the narrative could alternate between different points of view. The doctor is in the present, while the patient relives chaotic terrors and events that may be imaginary or misremembered.
- *Genre influences a story's structure:*
    - A story set in India might borrow from Indian dramatic repertoire by structuring its story as a succession of moods.
    - A story about women persecuted as witches in the 17th century

might use scenes arranged as a series of tableaux that imitated paintings of the period.

Whatever option you take, your audience should find the story's structure and language rooted in its characters, narrative style, topic, genre, or message.

However your story begins, it implies a "contract." It is wise to imply straight away what the story will deal with, and how it will proceed. An effective contract (also called the *hook*) draws the audience into the piece, and persuades them to suspend disbelief.

Troubleshooting

Here are more ways to flush out problems and find solutions. You can apply them initially to an outline, then again when you reach the full draft stage, when it is common to feel you can no longer see the wood for the trees.

Getting the Story Started

Let the audience know quickly what the piece is about. Your screen tale is fatally handicapped if minutes roll past with no hint of its focus. It's like sitting hungry in a restaurant that has failed to give you a menu. See how others set the scene for their work by running the first minutes of several feature films. How did the successful ones claim your attention, and how quickly? Do the same with novels. *Anna Karenina* begins, "All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion." Interesting families, says Tolstoy contentiously, are animated by their conflicts. Even if you disagree, you read on.

Hide exposition. Realizing the author is briefing us can be like catching the puppeteer at work, so camouflage your exposition by establishing it visually. Details of the era, place, backstory, relationships, characters, and their agendas should all ideally unfold during action.

Keep exposition minimal, and space it out. When your audience must absorb new situations or meet new characters, hold back all information extraneous to the immediate situation till later, or risk

making your audience gag on an overload. Hold each item until we really need it.

Double-check for important expository information. It is fatally easy for the writer, so familiar with the basics, to omit something vital. Train yourself to read with a newcomer's lack of foreknowledge—a prime discipline all on its own.

Character Issues

Involve us with your main characters soon. Don't waste time introducing us slowly to the rugged landscape, working up an atmosphere, and so on. A slow pace was fine for readers with excess time on their hands in the 19th century, and can still work with a captive audience in the theatre, concert hall, or cinema. But usually your audience will turn to other things unless you boldly claim their attention. Grab us with action that commits the characters to a compelling situation. This is the "contract" you strike with your audience. Start with momentum—something Shakespeare, with a whole company to feed, knew very well. Often his plays start in a tumult of action that leaves you gasping to catch up.

Keep the story moving as new characters come on the scene. In jazz the rhythm section seldom stops when a new soloist enters. So don't stop the action to let us meet a new character. Keep up your story's momentum

Inhabit each character. In separate readings, try identifying for the length of the piece with only one character's reality at a time. As you explore his or her subjective needs, feelings, and perceptions, improvise his or her interior monologue. This can lift flat characters from being inanimate foils and ensure that round characters act from a developing agenda.

Don't invent a new character to solve a plot problem. If she is indispensable, make her a functioning part of the story well before you make her perform that vital plot function.

Make sure the characters have enough opposing and conflicting qualities. Because conflict is at the heart of all drama, make sure

your characters differ in temperament, social background, habits, likes, dislikes, and agendas. This will generate the kind of friction that drama needs. Interesting characters tend to have internal conflicts as well as external ones, and this indicates their unfinished business in life. As part of our quest in life, many of us hitch up with our opposites.

Know what your characters are trying to get or do. Having decided a character's dominant motivation, remember to make that character keep evolving, however minimally. During any rewrite, keep asking, "What is this character trying to get or do *now?*" Finding new answers will keep your characters fresh, questing, and dynamic.

Develop your characters. Don't settle for a formula; write character biographies for your characters so each is unique. View documentary films about so-called ordinary people to see exactly how and where you got information about each person's life.

Point of View

Whose story is it? Check whose POV you are suggesting, and consider whose should prevail. Prove your choice by experimentally privileging other possible POVs. If you still cannot decide, you probably haven't yet decided who or what the piece is really about.

Sustaining Dramatic Tension

"Make them laugh, make them cry, but make them wait." Storytelling, like striptease, must keep the audience in anticipation. Disrobe too fast or too slow, and your act fails. As the story proceeds, ensure your audience has questions to answer, dilemmas to judge, and contradictions to weigh. Keep it wondering so it stays in that wonderful state of anticipation in which minds and imaginations are hard at work.

Raise the stakes, but keep them credible. You can often intensify whatever is stopping a character from accomplishing their goals. Make them work harder, suffer more, and play for higher stakes. Drama about untroubled middle-class people leading calm,

materially assured lives is flat unless you can raise the stakes by injecting the sensational. Make real life your teacher: What really creates tension in ordinary people's lives?

Vary how you act on your audience, but maintain the intensity of demand. Novice fiction is often monotonous because scenes are too similar in type, rhythm, or content. Variety and contrast keep us fresh. Avoid making inconsistently high or low demands, sometimes overworking the audience by compressing or truncating a complex situation, and sometimes boring it with indulgent late-night discussions or artful montages about the coming of spring. Scan your piece with the "intensity meter" in hand and assess each scene's demands on the audience. Give them ratings between 1 and 10. Now draw a graph plotting how all the sequences play. Your curve should "breathe" between high and low intensities, and crescendo at a logical place in the overall design. If it doesn't, rearrange scenes and rewrite until it does.

See that climaxes are well-placed. A barometric chart for your entire story will show where the high points lie in each scene and whether they are high enough. How well are these incidental climaxes distributed? Are they bunched? Do they come too early in the story, leaving you with too much falling action? Try redistributing them by transposing scene cards. One crisis should stand out as the turning point for the whole story. Once you know this, see whether you are using the right point-of-view character, starting the story too early or too late, or taking too long to establish the characters' problems.

Under any new conditions, rewrite your working hypothesis. This is fascinating if unsettling work.

Excess Baggage

Kill your darlings. Any scene, no matter how dear to the writer, is excess baggage if the piece works without it. The same is true for characters. Less is always more. Remove:

- Dialogue whose meaning you can render through action

- Characters or scenes not strictly necessary
- Anything without a clearly defined dramatic function

Check for multiple endings. How your story takes leave of its audience is what the audience most remembers. *Smoke Signals* (1998, Figure 24–4), Chris Eyre's funny and endearing film about life on an Indian reservation, has three endings. This common fault spikes a story's most potent weapon—its parting shot. Multiple endings happen when storytellers try to convey too many messages. Look rigorously at your piece, identify its thematic backbone, and ditch whatever isn't the single, most effective conclusion. Remake your working hypothesis to identify its theme and what ending is most appropriate.

Figure 24–4 Smoke Signals, an endearing tale of reservation life marred by multiple endings.

Stay True to Your Intentions

Keep rethinking your working hypothesis. With each new draft, the story's premise subtly shifts. Updating the hypothesis often seems uphill and unnecessary, but doing it confronts you with your latest intentions. Often these have become inconsistent. You must stay abreast of what you are doing, and, let it be said loud and clear,

most people do not.

Put your work away for a few days before rereading it. The writer's occupational hazard is partial blindness from the glare of over-familiarity. Get enough distance so that, at the very least, you can see what any newcomer effortlessly sees in your work.

Seek audience reaction and feedback. It's an audience medium, so make your audience your masters by listening to them. Ask open questions and, without arguing or explaining, listen carefully to the answers.

Yielding to Dramatic Conventions

If you feel outside forces taking over your tale, you are right. The dramatic conventions are asserting themselves—the forces from human experience of narrative that affect your work much as the moon affects the oceans. So before you expand an outline, let's quickly consider how tradition can exert such invasive authority.

Every writer, knowingly or otherwise, operates from the bloodlines of their art form. These conventions survive and prosper because they are useful at facilitating narrative purposes. Any writer, actor, dancer, songwriter, or comedian who enthralls us is making skillful use of both old and new. Genres and structural forms are parts of this cultural connections kit, and you can often get ideas and help by comparing your work to one similar in another art form. Dramatic conventions affect a work's

- *Length.* We expect different things of different-length works.
- *Language.* We expect interesting discourse in heightened language. Metaphor, symbol, simile, analogy, and rhythms are all part of the dialogue between audience and artist, just as they are in song.
- *Genre.* We expect particular families of work to handle particular topics in particular ways. An identifiable genre accelerates our entry into the story and helps us to focus on its salient points.
- *Medium.* We bring different expectations to poetry, songs, short stories, animation films, documentary, experimental films, *avant garde* theatre, television, modern dance, and so on. The medium is also the message.

- *Plot.* The contest between individual will and the rules of the universe provides the dramatic tension. Often its creator tries to engage with the current doubts, beliefs, and interests of the audience.
- *Style.* Stylistic choices concern mood, rhythms, point of view, density of language, poetical allusions, and individual voice. The latter is more inherent than chosen.
- *Morality and ethics.* Most artworks exploit the critical dichotomies in the human mind such as our perennial concern about good and evil. Right versus wrong is less interesting than right versus right.

As you expand your outline, you are shaping your audience to anticipate particular things. You may not give it entirely what it expects, for subverting expectations is an oft-used way of springing surprise or maintaining dramatic tension. You can keep things lively by splicing genres and types of discourse together as a way to push or subvert expectations. The conventions, though old, are always in change and always in negotiation. Like spoken language, they must evolve if they are to remain potent and useful.

High Art and Low Art

Attracting a wide audience can pose a quandary. By reaching overmuch toward what the audience knows, the teller may patronize us, lose contact with tale's source in the authentic, and compromise his or her own "voice." Conversely, the teller who focuses inwardly on personal concerns may fail to show anything we recognize or care about. In between these extremes lies a noble expectation—that stories of depth and universality arise from individual experience, concern, and conscience. By touching our hearts, storytellers diminish the existential void between us.

Cultural snobs divide art into high and low, but there is no inherent conflict between "good" and "popular." Shakespeare, the ultimate poet and dramatist, was a bestseller in his time and has been ever since. By working with the culture you know intimately, you can infuse even a slapstick comedy with the underlying seriousness that treats the human condition in a responsible and entertaining way.

25 Expanding to the Finished Product

You can now expand your strong, well-tested outline into its final form, be it a short story, novel, stage play, documentary proposal, or fiction screenplay. For plot-driven works, you have done much of the tough brainwork during the ideation stage, but those that are character-driven, and those with multiple characters and subplots, will often wander widely from your initial expectations. Strong characters in literary fiction are, for instance, notorious for elbowing their author aside and taking over the story. Not surprisingly, novelists will sometimes admit that they write in order to discover what they are really writing about. So expect your outline to lead onward to a long, evolutionary process. Expect new ideas to surface, ones that challenge your preconceptions and surpass the original concept.

Work from your own resources as long as possible, and look for guidance only when you meet intractable problems. Write to a daily schedule, even though you sometimes don't feel like it. Work done regularly usually accomplishes more of value than sporadic marathons. Don't be afraid to tackle especially appealing scenes out of order. Everyone works differently, and inspiration is most lasting when you work in your own way and embrace what most sustains you in the process.

Envision what you want to accomplish by way of particular prizes or festivals, and make a project schedule to get yourself there (Figure 25–1). The conventional path—writing when you feel like it, and seeing whether you finish anything—is the passive dilettante approach. Be bold and schedule the bridge you must build to realize your intended creation. Apart from motivating you, it will allow you to learn how long the various stages take—which is invaluable self-knowledge in professional situations.

The guidelines that follow include tips for several narrative forms, and a short bibliography to help you find more specialized help. If this seems sketchy, it is because anything more comprehensive would be suffocating. Online there is a wealth of help and discussion by and for writers. Simply enter your query in a search engine and brace yourself for the torrent.

Project	Step	Start	Finish	Tasks
	1	1/15/17	2/10/17	Pitch ideas, develop outline
Title_____	2	1/25/17	2/1/17	Research places, people, settings, etc.
_____ (ten-minute fiction project)	3	2/6/17	4/1/17	Write and rewrite script
	4	3/7/17	3/20/17	Cast actors, put together crew
	5	3/15/17	3/19/17	Choose locations, secure permissions
	6	3/22/17	3/29/17	Develop cast performances
	7	4/10/17	4/15/17	Shoot
	8	4/11/17	5/10/17	Edit, research festivals to enter
	9	5/12/17	5/25/17	Make DVDs and press kit
	10	5/14/17	7/15/17	Enter twenty festivals, win awards

Figure 25–1 Sample agenda for a short film project.

Writing for the Screen

This is cinema, so plan to really use your medium. Imagine you are writing primarily for the silent screen, and you won't go far wrong. Also, stick to what is affordable to produce: set your work in the present day, have accessible locations, and have a small cast. It won't cramp you in any way artistically.

- Aesthetics:
    - Tell your story visually and not verbally. Cinema is a visual, juxtapositional, even melodramatic medium. Write behavior, images, actions, and reactions. Write dialogue when nothing else is possible.
    - Keep point of view in mind so you give us the subjectivity of the characters and their storyteller.

    - Stretch your audience's imagination by under-informing rather than over-informing.
    - Use the audience's knowledge and expectations of genre.
- Visualization:
    - Choose subjects, characters, and settings for their visual and behavioral strengths.
    - Work to create a special, strong, and different mood for each scene.
    - Alert us to subtext through visual juxtaposition, symbolic imagery, and metaphors, but only ones that are organic to your story and its world.
- Dialogue and sound:
    - Reproduce natural conversation by using its essence, never its prolixity.
    - Make each character speak with his or her own voice, not yours (research character types with a recorder and transcribe what they say).
    - Use the emotional associations and narrative possibilities of sound. It's a powerful component in creating mood (research your locations).
- Economy:
    - Plan to use local, present-day settings and situations whenever possible.
    - Keep the cast small.
    - Avoid special effects.
    - Avoid period costuming, sets, or props.
- Collaboration:
    - Cinema depends on director, actors, and technicians. Trust their expertise and don't smother the reader with your idea of their contributions.
    - Before releasing anything as finished, solicit plenty of other people's reactions.

Standard Screenplay Format

The industry screenplay standard (Figure 25–2) is the ultimate in convenience and no professional will look at anything else. In standard layout, a page yields roughly a minute of screen time. A screenplay is unbound, and secured by a single brad through its top left-hand corner. This lets an interested party copy it easily for distribution to other readers. See bibliography for copyright and other protection.

Font: Courier, 12 point, 10 pitch type, nonproportional spacing. No variations.

Margins: Left, 1.5 inches. Right, 1.0 inch. Top, 0.5 inches to page number, 1.0 inch to the body. Bottom, 0.5 to 1.5 inches, depending on position of page break.

Pagination and running head: Number the pages and include a running head to identify screenwriter and film title.

Spacing: Single.

Title page: Title and author centered and one-third down page, then flush right at the bottom of page put the author's name, social security number, and contact information.

Page breaks: Never break scene heading from scene, or character's name from their line.

Scene headings (also called **slug lines)**: Each scene begins with a flush-left, capitalized scene heading that lists:

- Interior or exterior (abbreviated as INT. or EXT.)
- Location description
- Time of day (DAY, NIGHT, SUNSET, DAWN, etc.)

Body Copy. Scene or action description, mood setting, stage directions in single spacing. Runs the width of the page but double-spaced away from scene headings and dialogue. Sometimes called *stage directions*, body copy should:

- Evoke situation and characters in minimal but colorful language.
- Stipulate nothing irrelevant or impractical.

- Set a scene impressionistically, never comprehensively. (Example: “Unmade single bed, ashtray full, underwear overflowing from drawers, crucifix hanging crookedly.”)
- Set the scene mood boldly, briefly, and evocatively. (“Raw dawn over wet, lackluster streets” is enough to fire the reader’s imagination and inspire the cinematographer.)
- Give action descriptions that leave room for interpretation. (“York looks around nervously,” not “York puts his right-hand index finger to the center of his lower lip and inches forward to see around the gloomy, gray-painted stairway.”)
- Capitalize character names in body copy only when they first appear in a scene. Repeat them thereafter in lower-case.

Dialogue sections are:

- In single spacing.
- Headed by character’s name in capitals and tabbed across to around 4.0 inches.
- Block-indented and set between reduced margins (left 3.0 inches, right 2.5 inches).
- Preceded and followed by a space.
- Specially marked when dialogue must be split across a page break. Put (MORE) just before page break, and (CONT’D) after character’s name on following page.
- Accompanied only when strictly necessary by stage directions inside brackets.
- Dialogue is most effective when it is:
    - Brief and compressed.
    - Distinguished by the individual flavor and rhythm of the particular speaker.
    - A verbal action—that is, acting on someone or eliciting something.
    - Accompanied by a strong subtext. The most interesting characters in films, like those in life, seldom say directly what they really feel or want,

but express it indirectly in subtextual ways.

- Focused on what the audience cannot see. (It would be ludicrous and redundant for a character to remark, "That's a smartly cut brown tweed coat you're wearing.")

FADE IN:
EXT. SUBWAY STATION EVENING
Poor part of town, garbage on sidewalk. KATIE, early 30s, stocky build, labors along carrying a heavy shopping bag. At sound of APPROACHING TRAIN, she breaks into an awkward run.

KATIE
(to herself)
Damn, I'm not going to make it.

EXT. SUBWAY PLATFORM EVENING
Katie clatters down the steps onto platform and looks at the departing train. A hand touches her shoulder. She whirls in defensive alarm, then her expression changes to wonderment.

KATIE
How did you get here so fast?
You frightened me.

VADIM, early 40s, dark clothing and graying beard, smiles at her quizzically. He takes the shopping bag, looks inside, and tearing open a packet of crackers offers her one, which she takes reluctantly.

VADIM
(chewing)
They don't know I'm here yet?

KATIE
Of course not! This time
it's your call, not mine.

Vadim opens his coat, pulls a yellow, snake-like ferret from an inner pocket. He wraps the animal around his neck like a muffler and dusts his nose with its tail. Katie draws back, afraid. Vadim is more amused than ever.

KATIE
It smells! I can smell it from
here! What is it anyway?

Vadim goes to give it to her, but instinctively she retreats.

Figure 25–2 Example of standard screenplay format.

Camera and Editing Directions

- These are a distraction and an infallible sign of amateurism. Never use them.
- Only use transitions like "Cut to," "Dissolve to," when they are indispensable to understanding. Place them capitalized between scenes, consistently flush left or flush right.

Sound and Music Directions

- Specify sounds only to advance the mood or narrative.
- Never specify music or even its placement unless it has special meaning to the plot.

The screenplay format is a trap for the unwary. Its theatrical layout suggests that movies are fueled by dialogue, but the opposite is true: memorable films are usually more visual and behavioral than verbal. To see how minimal a screenplay should be, examine one for a film you admire. Be careful, however, that you are reading the original screenplay, and not an after-the-fact transcription of the finished film.

You can write screenplays by setting up your word processor's tabbing. To write more easily in correct format, invest in one of the screenwriting software programs, such as Movie Magic or Final Draft. They automatically format screenplays, TV episodes, stage plays, and even novels. Expect a variety of excellent features including a spell checker, thesaurus, and an index-card and outlining feature that lowers the labor of wholesale rewriting. Check out the latest versions and offers at www.screenplay.com/, www.writersstore.com/, and www.finaldraft.com. Educational software companies like Academic Superstore (www.academicsuperstore.com/) offer substantial discounts for *bona fide* educators and students. The Screenwriters Guild of America (www.screenwritersguild.org) and the Writers Guild of America (www.wga.org) both review writing software. The WGA site also offers model contract forms and a wealth of other information.

There is a dizzying profusion of texts about screenwriting. Beware high-priced workshops whose esoteric methods and formulae promise sure success in Hollywood. There's a preview of one in Spike Jonze's comedy *Adaptation*

(2002). Written by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, it tells a self-reflexive story about a screenwriter called Charlie Kaufman who is struggling to adapt a real book called *Orchid Thief* (about an orchid thief …). Amid this self-referential hall of mirrors the screenwriter debates screenwriting's conundrums with his screenwriting twin brother. Expect entertainment and not a little cynical instruction.

To learn more practical stuff about screenwriting from a film director's perspective, see the screenwriting chapters of Michael Rabiger and Mick Hurbis-Cherrier's text, *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics* (Focal Press, 2013). Seeing how a director assesses and interprets a screenplay will complement the work you are doing here.

Documentary Film Proposal

A documentary proposal describes a hypothetical movie based on research and informed expectation. While a fiction film interprets an exhaustively developed script, a documentary is a more circular and speculative entity whose story does not settle before you have researched, conceptualizing, directed, and edited it. To explain how you arrive at the final version would take excessive circumstantial discussion here, but a booklist to help you follows.

Documentaries usually start from a proposal. They are a pain to do, but indispensable for communicating your purposes and for raising financial or other support. Writing and rewriting one is the very best way to refine your ideas about your intended film's style, content, dramatic structure, and thematic meaning.

There is no separate professional designation of writer in documentary as there is in fiction film, nor is there a meaningful way to write about a documentary without insider knowledge of production details. To propose a documentary convincingly and raise money, you should either observe professionals at work or use a how-to documentary production book to amass some documentary experience. My widely used *Directing the Documentary* (6th ed., Focal Press, 2015) will take you onward from the work you have done here. Making documentary is wonderful experience for fiction writers or

directors.

Plays

The power of theatre lies in the palpable presence and interaction of the characters. Because actors are three-dimensional people, not shadows on a screen, a good live performance is one being created as you watch. Plays are driven by strong characters who draw us deep into human predicaments, and the theatre is thus a laboratory for human relationship. It might be the rivalrous friendship of the nuclear physicists in Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, the agony of Shakespeare's Hamlet at being inadequate to protest his father's murder, or Linda Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* protecting her tired husband from his sons as he approaches suicide. Nothing about the human heart is beyond the theatre.

Plays can use abstract, minimalist settings to suggest time and place, and are not forced by the realism of photography as cinema is to contend with constantly encroaching realism. Though modern theatre is astonishingly agile, you must still sometimes get an actor bodily from one part of the stage to another if you specify a cut from Sydney to Soho.

Many cities nowadays have a theatre company that will "workshop" new plays—that is, actors will read them through on the stage, and audience and players will afterward critique your work and suggest solutions to its problem areas. However primitive this may be as a performance, it exposes a play to an audience and helps it evolve. Such events also publicize new work. Screenplays can go through a similar process with very good results.

ACT II
Scene 1

(Megan and Art's apartment, night. Rickety furniture, doorway leading off to a bedroom. MEGAN, pregnant, is trying to follow sewing directions at an old treadle sewing machine. ART, just got up, enters from the bedroom, putting on his outdoor jacket. Seeing her look up, he gives her a perfunctory kiss.)

ART
Hey babe, don't wait up. I'm going to Blackie's to see Tommy.

MEGAN
You're going out? You said you were going to stay home . . .

ART
Didn't know Tommy was going to be in town.

MEGAN
You said you weren't going out so much. You *said* so.

ART
But this is Tommy. Best friend from the Detroit days (she is silent). You know, *Tommy*.

MEGAN
But we promised we'd see your mom.

ART
Another day, we'll do it. Tommy called up when you were asleep.

MEGAN
That's the second time you've skipped out on your mom.

ART
Oh boy. Will ya quit naggin'? I'll call her from the bar.

MEGAN
Art, she's got terminal cancer.

Figure 25–3 Example of typical playwriting format.

Standard Playwriting Format

Stage actors have to rehearse while carrying the text in one hand, so play format crams a lot of text on the page (Figure 25–3). Ideas of what is standard vary, but here are some pointers:

Font: 12 point Times or other plain, easy-to-read type.

Binding and pagination: Play copies take a beating in use so print yours on strong paper and bind securely in a "term paper" cover

with inbuilt brads. Number pages sequentially.

Title page with play title, author's name, and author's contact information.

Preliminary pages with:

- A list of characters and thumbnail portrait of each
- A synopsis of the play
- The assignment of male/female roles, and which parts can be doubled (played by the same actor)
- Any special set or technical requirements

Dialogue pages with:

- Names of characters capitalized and centered above their lines
- Dialogue aligned to the left margin, 1.5 line-spaced, and running across the entire page

Stage directions between parentheses on a separate line, single-spaced, and indented as little as one tab, or as much as halfway across the page.

Scenes, each numbered and titled, with their termination marked "Scene Ends."

Play ending is marked "The End."

Novel or Short Story Format

How to submit a fiction manuscript varies slightly among publishing houses, so follow their instructions to the letter. The preferred layout allows a busy editor to estimate the finished work's page count and production costs. By using your word processor's style feature while you write, you can globally reset margins, indentation, font, or headings later for submission to different publishers. Here are brief guidelines:

Font: Depends on publisher but Courier, 12 point proportional spacing is usual. Do not justify your text—align to the left margin and leave ragged on the right.

Title page: Title and author centered and one-third down page, author's name beneath, centered, and contact information flush

right at the bottom of page.

Margins: Right and left, 1.5 inches. Top and bottom, 1.0 inches.

Pagination and running head: Number the pages and include a running head with title and author's name. Print on one side of the paper only and use heavy (20 lb) paper stock.

Spacing: Double spacing between lines and no extra space between paragraphs.

Paragraph indent: 1 inch.

Chapter numbers and titles: Centered, with "Chapter One" one line above chapter title. Leave two double line-spaces before first paragraph. New chapters start on a new page.

Extra space in the text: If you insert extra space, mark it with the pound sign (# # #) so the typesetter can see the space is not accidental.

Style: For guidance over punctuation, use of spaces, indentation, and suchlike use a style manual such as Joseph Gibaldi's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed., (Modern Language Association of America, 2009). The awful precision it calls for enables typesetters to reproduce your work with the fewest errors.

A detailed breakdown of the conventions for formatting a self-published novel format can be found at http://completelynovel.com/self-publishing/writers-toolbox-typesetting-and-format.

Submission

When you prepare to submit anything to a journal, publisher, or producer, make absolutely sure you are making your submission in the preferred format. Use your word processor's spelling and grammar checks, and get literate friends to closely proofread your manuscript, since nothing consigns it to oblivion faster than typos, spelling mistakes, and grammatical errors.

Consistent craft and style command immediate respect. Not only do they remove all barriers from reading, they imply you are a mature craftsperson with the highest standards, and are worth taking seriously.

Good luck and good writing!

Going Further

An excellent resource for the aspiring media writer is The Writers Room at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website, www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom. It contains hints, tips, and interviews with writers of different genres. Go to their Scriptsmart section for formatting models (feature screenplay, the TV script, the BBC house style for radio scripts, as well as formats for the UK stage, the US stage, and even for comic books).

At the Writers Guild of Great Britain (https://writersguild.org.uk/writing-for-film/) or at the Writers Guild of America (WGA, www.wga.org/) you'll find goldmines of information such as interviews, news of the profession, and cautionary hints about over-exposed topics. Also try *Zoetrope: All-Story* at www.all-story.com/, a "quarterly literary publication founded by Francis Ford Coppola in 1997 to explore the intersection of story and art, fiction and film."

Reading professional journals, websites, blogs, and e-zines is a good way to peer inside professional circles and absorb their concerns and discussion topics. When you need to pass as a professional, this is an excellent way of learning to walk the walk and talk the talk. Acting is not just for actors.

Today there are so many useful texts and manuals, it is best to browse them online until you see what calls to you. Good book information can be found at websites like The Writers Store (www.writersstore.com), Amazon (www.amazon.com), or Barnes and Noble (www.barnesandnoble.com). The Writer's Store has writing software and runs webinars. Amazon and Barnes & Noble often let you see chapter lists and sample text, and they also make it easy to find allied titles or books by a favorite author. For used copies at reasonable prices, try either Barnes & Noble's used books, or the gargantuan Abebooks website at www.abebooks.com. Entering "screenwriting" as the search-engine keyword, I was offered 4,725 copies, with the first 50 priced under $2.00. Be aware however that bargains may be disfigured by annotations or hard wear, though I have always found copies as described.

Useful books on adapting literature, documentary, and screenwriting are already listed at the end of the following chapters: Chapters 17 and 20,

adapting short stories; Chapters 18 and 19, nonfiction and documentary; Chapter 21, screenwriting for the feature film.

Legal

Donaldson, Michael and Lisa Calif. *Clearance & Copyright 4th Edition: Everything You Need to Know for Film and Television.* Silman-James, 2014 (Protecting your work, and negotiating with others about theirs. Rights, releases, partnerships, registering copyright, fair use, and a whole lot of other heart-stopping issues).

Theatre

Dow, Jan Henson and Shannon Dow. *Writing the Award-Winning Play.* 2003.

Dramatist's Guild. *The Dramatists Guild Resource Directory.* 2012 (Good for help with submission procedures and the theatrical marketplace).

Garrison, Gary. *A More Perfect Ten: Playwriting and Producing the 10-Minute Play.* 2008 (The short play is an excellent way to break in).

Gooch, Steve. *Writing a Play.* 2001.

Hall, Roger A. *Writing Your First Play.* 1998.

Hart, Anne. *How to Write Plays, Monologues, or Skits from Life Stories, Social Issues, or Current Events.* 2004 (A good accessory for anyone working in soap opera, comedy, or theatre that is political and/or satirical—all genres that keep a weather eye on current events).

Hatcher, Jeffrey. *The Art and Craft of Playwriting.* 2000.

MacLoughlin, Shaun. *Writing for Radio: How to Write Plays, Features, and Short Stories That Get You on Air.* 2001 (National Public Radio has stations all over the USA making radio features and documentaries, as does the BBC in England, and the CBC in Canada—to name but a few).

McLaughlin, Buzz. *The Playwright's Process: Learning the Craft from Today's Dramatists.* 1997.

Packard, William. *Art of the Playwright: Creating the Magic of the Theatre.* 1987.

Polsky, Milton. *You Can Write a Play!* 2002.

Sossaman, Stephen. *Writing Your First Play.* 2000.

Sweet, Jeffrey. *The Dramatist's Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright.* 1993.

Wright, Michael. *Playwriting in Process: Thinking and Working Theatrically.* 2009.

Prose Fiction

The barriers to writing prose fiction are less obviously technical than writing for film and theatre, but this is surely misleading. The number of texts available to would-be fiction-writers is truly enormous and can be grouped by genre and aim. Here anyway are some books chosen by area that cater to the self-directed writer. You can infinitely enlarge this selection by entering keywords describing your particular interest in the bookseller's search engine.

Bell, James Scott and Writer's Digest editors. *Crafting Novels & Short Stories: The Complete Guide to Writing Great Fiction.* 2012.

Browne, Renni and Dave King. *Self Editing for Fiction Writers.* 2004 (Full of excellent advice from two professional editors).

Dils, Tracey E. *You Can Write Children's Books.* 2009.

Frey, James N. *The Key: How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth.* 2002.

Gotham Writers' Workshop editor. *Writing Fiction: The Practical Guide from New York's Acclaimed Creative Writing School.* 2003.

Grafton, Sue (Editor), *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America.* 2002.

Highsmith, Patricia. *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction.* 2001 (A rarity, a how-to by a foremost practitioner).

LaPlante, Alice. *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing.* 2010.

Lukeman, Noah T. *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile.* 2005.

Maass, Donald. *The Career Novelist: A Literary Agent Offers Strategies for Success.* 1996.

Michaels, Leigh. *On Writing Romance: How to Craft a Novel That Sells.* 2007 (The author should know: she has published more than one hundred books).

New York Writers Workshop. *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing.* 2006.

North, Audra. *The Romance Writer's Self-Publishing How-to Handbook.* 2014

(For those interested in pursuing the self-publishing route).

Roberts, Gillian. *You Can Write a Mystery*. 1999.

Seuling, Barbara. *How to Write a Children's Book and Get It Published*. 2004.

Shepard, Aaron. *The Business of Writing for Children: An Award-Winning Author's Tips on Writing and Publishing Children's Books, or How to Write, Publish, and Promote a Book for Kids*. 2000.

Vinyard, Rebecca. *Romance Writer's Handbook: How to Write Romantic Fiction and Get It Published*. 2004.

Whitely, Carol and Barry Littmann. *Everything Creative Writing Book: All You Need to Know to Write a Novel, Short Story, Screenplay, Poem, or Article*. 2002.

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Note: page numbers in italics indicate figures.