

Introduction

Writing is an art. It's also a business. Creativity is only part of it -- it's the icing. The rest of it is cake. Some writers are born. Most are trained. This is a craft, like woodworking or furniture making. Some people are competent woodworkers once they've learned their craft. They make a good living but are not necessarily an inspiration to others. Others shine and that's the talent showing through.

This class discusses how to write fiction. It doesn't cover non-fiction. What we discuss works for short fiction or long fiction. It will work for any type of fiction -- the essentials of fiction are the same regardless of whether you're writing romance, mysteries, science fiction or contemporary fiction

To help you as we go along: remember some memorable films or books. Think about what we're discussing in terms of that book or movie.

Do you want to be published?

- I teach a separate class on publishing. In that class, I discuss the publishing industry, query letters, networking, conferences, etc.
- This isn't a class about writing fiction that sells. That's another class.

What are the five building blocks of fiction?

- Who is in your book? Characters: these are the protagonists. Most people start a book with a very clear idea of their characters. You also need strong villains (bad guys) who are as strong (if not stronger) than the hero and heroine. All of your characters need to be well-rounded.
- What is happening in the book? This is the plot, the events that move your characters forward. Plot has to be believable whether it's a science fiction book or a historical, based in fact.
- Where and When for the book. Setting is where the book takes place. Setting is often linked with a time -- for example, Victorian England or Puritan America. That's why I group Setting & Time together.
- Why are the characters doing what they do? This is the goal, the motivation and the conflict that drives the plot. This ties in with a well-rounded protagonist and villain.
- How do you make the story unique? This is your talent, your style, it's how you pace a book, it's the mechanics of a book (grammar, etc.). This can't really be taught but it can be learned...

On to the details

Characters

A character is any creature that has a main focus in your books. It can be a space alien, an animal, or a human. It is a creature that moves the plot forward. Note that a setting can sometimes become a character (think of the Colorado resort in *The Shining*). We'll talk about that kind of 'character' when we discuss settings.

What makes a good character?

- A good character is one that a reader remembers. Think of some memorable characters: Scarlet O'Hara; Marty McFly (*Back to the Future*); Ripley in *Aliens*.
- Often a character will have admirable traits. We secretly think we might be like them if we were put in a similar situation.
- Make sure they are well-rounded: they should have worries, fears, motivation.
- Why is the hero heroic? What makes him help the heroine (and vice versa).
- What drives them?

Where do you find good characters?

- They can be a pastiche of people you know or be based on a particular person. Your story will often define what characters are needed.
- Most stories require: a hero, a heroine, a villain. These are often called the protagonist (hero/heroine) and antagonist (villain).
- A villain can be anything that prevents the h/h from achieving their goal. Often this isn't something human or else it's something that takes human form (i.e., *The Shining*).
- A villain should be as strong as the hero/heroine, if not stronger. Otherwise, it's a one-sided fight.

How do you create a unique character?

- Use a picture of someone when you describe a character. Keep the picture close by so you can always refer to it. Or some authors do 'character interviews': come up with a series of questions and envision how characters would answer them.
- If you're writing aliens or animals, be prepared to handle a unique POV. I do this in my time-travel books, where one of the main characters is a shape-shifter and *must* stay in animal form.
- Know your characters will say or do when: happy, stressed, frightened, hurt, confused. Find their *unique* ways of expressing themselves.
- How do you keep track of these things? Character charts; interviews with characters; pictures, story boards. Do whatever it takes to keep the characters 'real' to you.
- A hero and a heroine should be flawed. They should have something that must be fixed/repaired/mended to make them 'full' or 'complete.'
- A character always has a 'tell' -- some habit or quirk that tells you when that character is stressed (Molly sorts her candy; Jane is overly wordy; Booker paces).

What happens to your characters drives the plot

- Give each character -- hero, heroine, villain -- a goal.
- There should be an underlying *absolutely must need* goal. For example: an external goal might be to reach safety. An internal goal might be to become a part of a group.
- By reaching one goal, your hero might obtain the other.
- One of the big plot points in the book can be when the h/h realize what his or her internal goal is. Then when an obstacle comes up, they're desperate to reach that goal.
- Remember: *emotion comes from conflict*.
- Think about the worst thing that could happen. Make it happen to the hero/heroine and make them GROW from that.
- They have to overcome obstacles and reach the goal. Otherwise, the story is flat.

Don't forget the villain

- Everything said about the protagonist goes for the antagonist, too: he/she needs a goal. That goal will put him in conflict with the hero.
- A villain should be charismatic. This is someone a reader can relate to. Remember Randall Flagg from *The Stand*? He was a metaphor for evil but he was also charismatic. A reader could understand why he drew others to him.
- A villain is powerful. He should be a good match for your hero.
- A villain is motivated. He has a good reason to do what he does. Again: Flagg: he derived pleasure from the pain of others, PLUS he was after power. *Everyone* can relate to someone who wants power.
- The villain can express things a hero could never express. A villain can be nasty in a way a hero shouldn't be...even though the hero might want to be.
- Know your villain as well as you know your hero/heroine. Make him well-rounded.
- A villain doesn't have to be a person: it can be a thing (think: The Perfect Storm), an event (a War), etc.
- Villains are active -- they pursue, push, antagonize, affect the protagonist.
- Like a hero/heroine, a villain should be believable. Whether it's a metaphor for evil or a changing world (as in *Gone with the Wind*), the villain has to be something or someone that the reader will recognize as an insurmountable problem for the protagonist. How will they overcome the villain? That's part of the plot.

Don't forget the secondary characters

- The secondary characters often reflect what the main characters are trying to achieve. For example: a 'buddy' may be happily married with kids. That's what the heroine secretly wants. She can imagine her life in the life of her friend.
- Or a friend can be a sounding board for ideas.
- Make sure the friends are as well-rounded as the heroine/hero/villain.

Plot

You've got your characters. Now what are you going to do with them? Always ask yourself this: What would X do in this situation? How would he react? How would she react? What would she say? Why did she do what she did? A typical problem beginning writers have is that they want a certain outcome in a scene so they 'force' their characters to do something. It just doesn't ring true.

You created these people. Let them run the show. The show is the Plot.

The hook

- What keeps the reader interested? What sets it apart from others of its type?
- ALWAYS start your book with a great hook and end each chapter with a hook, to keep the reader turning the page.

Story arcs

- An 'arc' is just that: a low point to a high point to a low point. A story has a beginning - middle - end.
- Characters have arcs (think: bad guy who turns good in the end, or bad girl who has a heart of gold: how she changes throughout the story)
- Scenes have arcs; chapters have arcs; books have arcs.
- Your story isn't *what* happens. It's *who* it happens *to*.

Black moment

- This is point where you're sure things can't possibly work out: the hero walks out on the heroine; the heroine is hanging by her nails on a cliff.
- A story can have several black moments but make sure it's a believable black moment: don't have a wishy-washy dilemma.
- FOR EXAMPLE: if a problem is caused by a lack of communication make sure the characters really can't communicate. Make sure there's a believable reason for what caused that black moment.

Back story (this is equally character & plot)

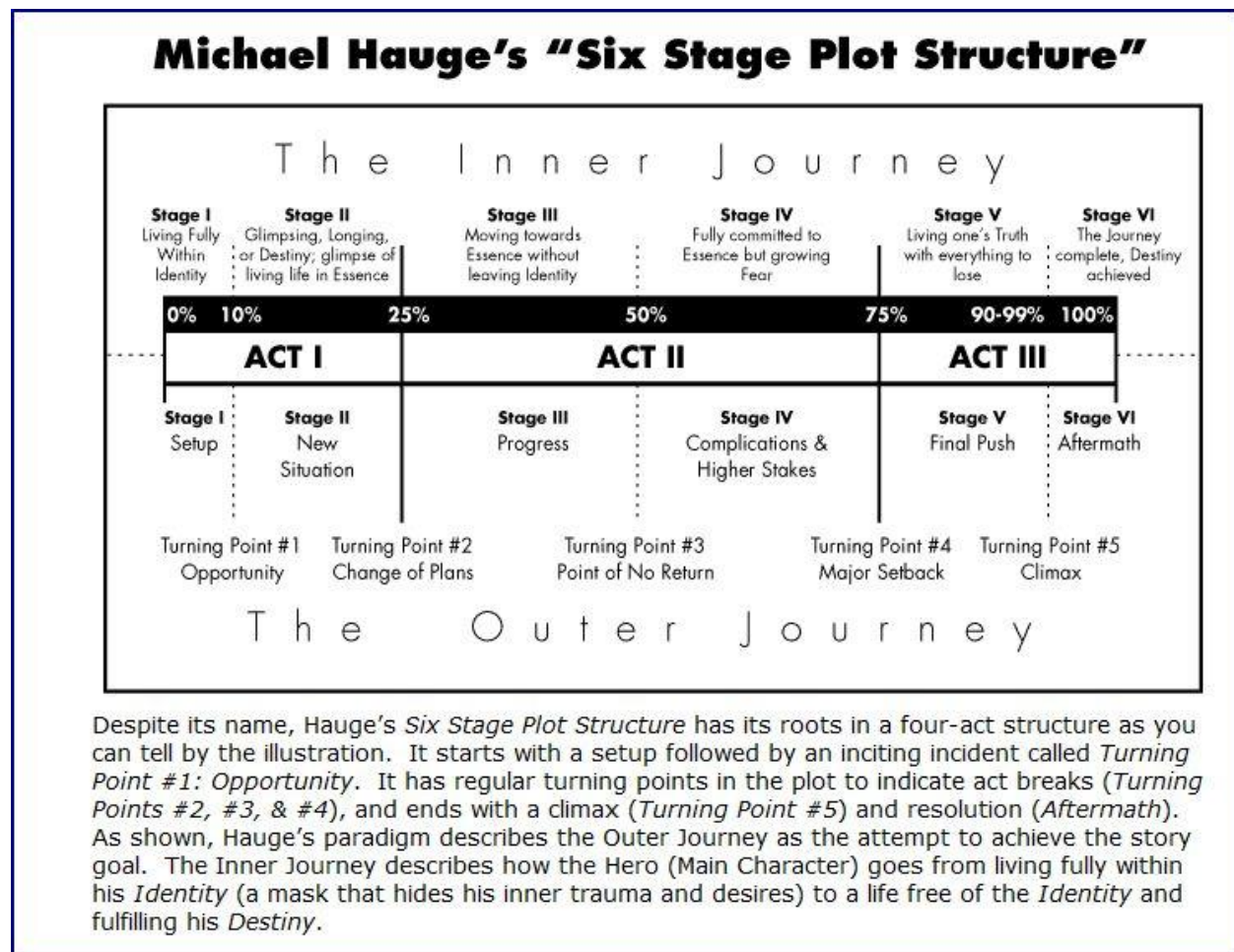
- This is what happened before the story started. Often it's the story's motivation.
- New authors want to include a lot of back story, to make sure a person understands why the story is taking place. One word. ***Don't.***
- It's okay to write out the back story. Just don't include it in the story. Keep it for yourself, to refer to as you write.
- Example from my books: *Candy*: The back story is that Molly and J T were lovers 20 years ago. J T jilted her and ran off with Shirley. That heartbreak caused Molly to

marry someone else, who later died. Rather than stay in town, she went off to the Big City where she made a new life for herself. I allude to this information throughout the entire book. The first time the reader hears about it, Molly is summing it up in a flippant internal dialog ('he jilted me to run off with that bimbo, Shirley'). We don't see her hurt and her anger until later.

Resolution

- How will your story end?
- Are you going to tie up all the loose ends – if it's a mystery, you should.
- Will there be a Happily Ever After? Will there be a "Happily For Now?" Keep in mind: 'happy' can be a relative term. Some genres require an HEA.

Plot stages (in general)



Hauge talks about "identity" vs. "essence": very basically it's how a character identifies oneself externally versus what internally motivates a character.

- Stage 1: The setup: introducing your characters and conflicts. Usually 1 or 2 chapters in a single book, often the first book in a series (which in turn has these steps and stages).
- TURNING POINT 1: a new opportunity to grow.
- Stage 2: in a new situation. Characters are placed somewhere that gives them a glimpse of a different life.
- TURNING POINT 2: Forced out of the old life, into a new one.
- Stage 3: trying to reconcile the different parts of life: essence and identity.
- TURNING POINT 3: a point of no return, a commitment, a change that forces the character to act out of character.
- Stage 4: Complications make it hard to change; characters want to change but it's tough.
- TURNING POINT 4: Major setback. Black moment. *Everything to lose* at this point.
- Stage 5: The final push, the final fight, the tension that builds to the climax.
- TURNING POINT 5: The climax of the book. The h/h commits to something that will change them forever in the eyes of the world and themselves.
- Stage 6: The aftermath of the climax. A transformed existence. This may be a happy ending or not.

How do I devise a plot?

- You can devise plots in a lot of ways: off-the-cuff (sometimes called 'pantsers, as in seat of the pants), or outlined. YOU determine your best way to devise a plot.
- Some plots evolve as you write the book.
- EXAMPLE: I seldom know who the murderer is until chapter 9 or so. Then I go back and layer in the clues.
- We discuss techniques later.
- Keep the plot elements in mind as you consider your plot and craft your plot: the hook, arcs, black moments, back story.

Setting and Time

You've got your characters. You've got your plot. Where does all this action take place? Make sure you can easily picture your characters in that setting.

If they aren't at home there, make sure that comes across in your writing. For example, you can have a scene where the heroine is an expert fisherwoman. She takes the hero out in her boat and he's awkward and nervous. Your setting is a great way to show the weaknesses and strengths of your characters.

Location

- Is it rural? Is it urban? If it's urban, what kind of town is it? Do you know this town? If you don't, can you get there to do research?
- What does it sound like? Smell like? Feel like? Notice I didn't say 'look like' -- that's the first sense most people use to describe things.
- *Rule of thumb*: always try describing something using a sense *other* than sight. Fall back on visuals only when needed. It will add a richer feeling to your books.
- Where do your characters fit in this location? Is the hero a landowner? If so, know how big his estate is and know how long (1) it takes to ride a horse from point A to point B or (2) where his favorite spot is on the grounds or ... You get the idea. KNOW your location. Know your character in that location.

Dialogue

- Different places have their own dialects and ways of speaking. Using that unique element can add depth to a story. Imagine a rich hero and a poor heroine. Think how differently they'll speak. Now imagine him from England and her from the Bronx. Where is the story set? If it's set in England, she'll stand out like a sore thumb. And vice versa. Dialogue is a part of place.
- Make sure to add scene information during your dialogue. If it's cold, make sure the heroine is shivering as she speaks. Or she walks through a garden, touching items as she talks. Use dialogue to give a sense of scene.
- Although a setting can have a specific dialect (think of *Huck Finn*), dialect is very, very hard to write. And it's sometimes harder to read. So use dialect sparingly.
- When in doubt, read your dialogue aloud. You'll tell if it feels natural.
- The dialogue must have a point. Don't have talking just to show people interacting. Make sure the dialogue moves the story forward.
- Avoid over-punctuation!!!
- Make sure each character has a unique way of speaking. They should have their own ways of expressing themselves (this gets back to where your character fits in the setting).

Time period

- If this is a historical, it's essential you know the social structure of the day. See Ann Perry's books -- she does an exceptional job of capturing the feeling of Victorian London or England during World War I. This isn't just a superficial thing but it permeates the books and it motivates the characters. This is important to remember: social structures of the day can liberate or they can strangle.
- I write time-travel books. Although my characters are from the future, they're expected to know the conventions of the day. For example, women didn't travel alone during the 19th century.
- If this is a *futuristic*, make sure you have a clear idea of the rules of that day. Again, getting back to my time-travel books: I devised a future whereby people can easily travel back in time. I had to figure out a lot of details:
 - ✓ How did the time travel machine come about? Who created it? Who can use it?
 - ✓ Those people using it are involved in reincarnation. Is there a worry about 'meeting a former self'?
 - ✓ What's the vocabulary that surrounds your device? What's capitalized ("The History Patrol"). What isn't?
- *Contemporary books: some caveats*
 - ✓ If this is a current-day book, remember that it won't always be the current day. Some of your phrasing, words, vocabulary will be out of date in the future.
 - ✓ Make sure you don't use jargon that will only be known to a select few. Always add context if you *must* add jargon.
 - ✓ Be generic if you can. Use "MP3 player" versus "iPod". I don't do this -- I break my own rules. I make sure, though, that I mention what the iPod is used for in case anyone in my reading audience doesn't use one.
 - ✓ Remember *Peyton Place*? How about *Valley of the Dolls*? Did those books age well?

Goal, Motivation and Conflict

You've got your characters. You've got your plot. You've got a location. Why are they in that location involved in that plot?

Always ask yourself this: What would X do in this situation? How would he react? How would she react? What would she say? Why did she do what she did? This will always lead you to the motivation, and the goals, that underlie what makes your characters act the way they do.

Goals, motivation, and conflict: this is where plot intersects characters.

Goal

- This is a main (if not *the main*) part of the plot: What is the goal: is it to get married, discover a treasure, learn the identity of the hidden father?
- There's often an external goal and an internal one: the external goal is obvious to others but the internal goal is hidden. The character needs something to strive for, something he's not yet worthy of but is striving for.
- It can't be easily attained. It has to be attained by making choices under pressure *and* through a change on the part of the character.
- The goal the character starts with at the first isn't the same as at the end.
- It's a do-or-die scenario.

Motivation

- What motivates the characters? What is driving them? WHY is this so important?
- There's often an external motivation (just like there's an external goal) and an internal motivation.
- There must be a logical reason for wanting what he wants: for example, if you're going to have a wallflower suddenly risk her life, there had better be something at stake that's worth risking a life for.

Conflict

- What is keeping them from the goal? What is the overriding conflict in the story? It should seem insurmountable.
- Often it's a "If she wins, he loses. If he wins, she loses" situation. What are the stakes? Is a life at stake? A soul? The stakes must be high to make the story worthwhile.
- You must have turmoil and chaos. Out of that comes character development.
- It adds to the tension if there's a time factor involved: a ticking clock, a "must accomplish" by a certain time.

Some examples:

- A hero needs to find a cure for a disease because his brother has the disease. The heroine is working on a cure for a disease because it will win her a prestigious award. If the hero finds the cure first, she won't get the award. If she finds the cure first, his brother will die. The cure *must* be found within a month or the brother dies and she has to apply for the award within a month.
- Another, 'classic' example: The heroine owns a ranch and is trying to save it. The hero wants to build a big resort. The resort would be on the land she's trying to save (throw in some wild mustangs and make it about animals as well -- always a sure winner). If she wins, he won't get the land and his company will go belly-up. If he wins and gets the land, the horses will die and her family will lose the land that's been in the family for generations. Now add a time factor: she has one month to find a solution to her problems or the bank will foreclose. The hero has one month to obtain the land in order to satisfy the backers at his company.

How do you define GMC?

- Use the "Wants, Because...BUT" method:
 - Here's a 'low-stakes' version of the GMC: Bobby wants to ask a girl to the dance because he needs a date but he's nervous about asking someone.
 - Now up the ante: Bobby wants to ask Alice to the dance because she's the cutest girl in school but he's afraid to ask her because Bobby knows the school bully will ask her, too and he may get beat up if he asks her.
- How about this one: Booker wants to find Emma because he dreamed about her and knows she's the only woman he can ever love. But he's afraid that if he finds her, she won't love him.
- Now give the villain a GMC that intertwines with the hero's: Ryan wants to find Emma because he knows Booker loves her and Ryan hates Booker. But he also knows that if he finds Emma he can use her to force Booker to give in to Ryan's demands -- demands that may end up with Booker's death.
- You can set up a chart (described in Deb Dixon's *Goal, Motivation, and Conflict*) to track the GMC. To be honest, I don't do this (and I don't understand it).

Okay. Now tell me -- How Do I Do It?

Characters; Plot; Setting; GMC. What's left?

Check points

- ✓ Point of view (POV)
 - Third person
 - You give the viewpoint of several characters.
 - It's usually suggested to limit this to one or two characters. Try to keep an entire scene in one 'head'. Some authors get away with 'head hopping'. New authors seldom handle it well.
 - *Rule of thumb*: do the scene in the POV of the person who has the most to lose. It will provide the most emotional impact for the scene.
 - First-person
 - The "I" voice. My mysteries are 1st person, which is a challenge.
 - You can only show what that person would see. You can't show actions, emotions, from other points of view.
 - Usually considered tougher to do well.

- ✓ Style/Voice
 - Not to be confused with Point of View.
 - Style/Voice is your unique way of phrasing things, your vocabulary choices, your setting -- it's how you relay the story.

- ✓ Dialogue
 - Can be spoken conversation or internal.
 - Make sure it advances the plot. Make sure it's appropriate for the characters.

- ✓ Pacing
 - The 'speed' of your book.
 - The 'sagging middle' is a typical problem.
 - Make sure the pace is appropriate for the story; some are more fast-paced than others (thrillers vs. romances, for example).
 - Make sure there's a major plot point in each chapter.
 - Dole out information in the first 50 pages; don't give the reader the key to the book. Make the reader *read* for it.
 - At the mid-point: have a plot twist, a spin, a black moment: keep the reader guessing.
 - Increase tension in every scene. It doesn't have to be danger, but it does have to be something that makes you wonder what will happen to your characters next.

✓ Resolution

- Keep track of your hanging plot points and make sure they're tidied up.
- If you do leave something dangling (I did between books 2 and 3 of my Fatal Writers Series) make sure it appears small in relation to the other events that are happening.

How do I do it? Here are some tips:

- I write in individual chapters. Each one has a hook, an arc, a black moment. I write 12-15 page chapters and I expect 17-19 chapters per book. That way I can easily make sure I'm keeping the book on target.
- I found that the best thing for me is:
 - Write 'clean' -- remember your plot, remember the 'rules' (avoid adverbs, avoid tags, dialogue moves the story forward, etc.)
 - Don't agonize if a scene isn't going well. Get something down and move on.
 - Write every day. At least a bit every day. Think about your characters every day. Don't lose touch with them.
 - Learn what your attention span is. Mine is about 8 weeks on most books. After that, my interest will flag. Know what yours is.
 - Don't sweat the technique. Do what works for you. Believe in trial and error.
 - If a scene isn't working, try it from a different POV. It may be that you're in the 'wrong head'.
- Show, don't tell. *Mark felt fear wash through him.* Do this instead: *Mark's hands trembled and were so wet with sweat he could barely hold the gun.*
- Don't get distracted by research. It's really easy to delve into the tiny details of Gypsy life, for example (as in *PhDs, Pornography, and Premeditated Murder*), but you don't have to add *all* of it to the book. DON'T use research as an excuse not to write.
- Write more than you need. Cut later and leave as little as is necessary for the reader. Cut until you can cut no more.
- Ignore the perfectionist in your head.
- Look at your paragraph lengths. Is there a lot of white space? Not?
- In a paragraph of long sentences, a short sentence will have impact.
- Write what you would enjoy reading. You're your best audience.
- Integrate your writing life with the rest of your life. Try to make sure that neither suffers because of the other.
- Get feedback from others. You MUST be willing to accept criticism if you want to sell your work.
- If you hit a plot wall, sleep on it (or take a walk). It helps to break the problem into a question: *You have Jane kidnapped. Why can't Jane call for help? What happened to her cell phone?* Step back through the problem and see if you can add one or two words or a sentence that will explain away the problem.

- If a current scene is giving you trouble, just sketch it out then move on. Make sure to put enough on paper so you can easily come back and finish it. Don't be so 'sketchy' you can't add the detail you need.

The crappy details

- Most editors/agents are taking electronic submissions. That still means you need to send in your absolute best work.
- Don't submit until it's ready.
- 1" margins. Courier or Time Roman font (I prefer TR). Double space. Use a style sheet to indent. Never use tabs.
- Know grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- When in doubt, ask someone to read it for you.
- Keep a dictionary, thesaurus, and synonym finder handy.
- Grow a tough skin. You'll need it.

Define success for yourself. Continue to change your goals and your aspirations. Or not. It's your career. It's your life. Don't let others dictate how you measure success.

Writing is an optional choice you made. Don't whine about it. Just do it. You can walk away any time if it isn't fun anymore. And it should be fun. It's not a chore.

It's what you want to do.

Do it.