

the guardian

**HOW TO
WRITE
FICTION**
A GUARDIAN
MASTERCLASS

SH  RTS

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1. Introduction

How to write fiction: A Guardian masterclass

“Writing is a natural process,” says novelist Andrew Miller. “We are, all of us, geared up for it ... But no one writes for long without understanding that they are entering mystery ...”

To guide you on your way, we’ve assembled a cast of acclaimed writers and industry insiders. From harnessing what Nabokov called “the first little throb”, our writers will take you through every step of the creative writing process. Each chapter is accompanied by carefully crafted exercises from Kate Grenville’s *The Writing Book*, designed to help bring your novel to life.

We hope you find the advice and inspiration you need to sit down today and write.

The write way

With so many different ways to write fiction there are no hard-and-fast rules. Best to stop worrying about what you can't do and focus on what you're good at, says **Geoff Dyer**

The great thing about this cat – the writing one – is that there are a thousand different ways to skin it. In fact, you don't have to skin it at all – and it doesn't even need to be a cat! What I mean, in the first instance, is feel free to dispute or ignore everything in this introduction or in the articles that follow. As Tobias Wolff puts it in his masterly novel *Old School*: “For a writer there is no such thing as an exemplary life ... Certain writers do good work at the bottom of a bottle. The outlaws generally write as well as the bankers, though more briefly. Some writers flourish like opportunistic weeds by hiding among the citizens, others by toughing it out in one sort of desert or another.”

This freedom is the challenging perk of the non-job. If you are a tennis player any weakness – an inability, say, to deal with high-bouncing balls to your backhand – will be just that. And so you must devote long hours of practice to making the vulnerable parts of your game less vulnerable. If you are a writer the equivalent weakness can rarely be made good so you are probably better off letting it atrophy and enhancing some other aspect of your performance.

Writers are defined, in large measure, by what they can't do. The mass of things that lie beyond their abilities force them to concentrate on the things they can. “I can't do this,” exclaims the distraught Mother-Writer in *People Like That Are the Only People Here*, Lorrie Moore's famous story about a young child dying of cancer. “I can do quasi-amusing phone dialogue. I do the careful ironies of daydreams. I do the marshy ideas upon which intimate life is built ...” From the sum total of these apparent trivialities emerges a fiction which succeeds in doing precisely what it claims it can't.

Or take a more extreme example: Franz Kafka. Was ever a writer so consumed by the things he couldn't do? Stitch together all the things Kafka couldn't do and you have a draft of *War and Peace*. The corollary of this is that what he was left with was stuff no one else could do – or had ever done. Stepping over into music, wasn't it partly Beethoven's inability to conjure melodies as effortlessly as Mozart that encouraged the development of his transcendent rhythmic power? How reassuring to know that the same problems that afflict journeymen artists also operate at the level of genius.

A spokesman for the former, I have written novels even though I have absolutely no ability to think of – and no interest in – stories and plots. The best I can come up with are situations which tend, with some slight variation of locale, to be just one situation: boy meets girl. Other things – structure and tone – must, in these severely compromised circumstances, take over some of the load-bearing work normally assumed by plot. The same holds true for certain kinds of non-fiction, those animated by – and reliant on more than – the appeal of their ostensible subject matter.

This is another lesson: you don't have to know what kind of book you are writing until you have written a good deal of it, maybe not until you've finished it – maybe not even then. That's the second sense in which the cat doesn't have to be a cat. All that matters is that at some point the book generates a form and style uniquely appropriate to its own needs. Why bother offering readers an experience that they can get from someone else? The playwright David Hare once claimed that: “The two most depressing words in the English language are ‘literary fiction’.” Remember this: literary fiction does not set a standard that is to be aspired to; it describes a habit of convention that people – writers and readers alike – collapse into, like a comfy old sofa.

Which, surely, is not such a bad place to be. Except, for writers, the sofa should always be an extension of the desk. Reading is not just part of your apprenticeship; it continues to inform, stimulate and invigorate your writing life – and it is never passive. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion recalls her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, rereading *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, “trying to see how it worked”. (Styron's novel was, for him, “a flapping, gobbling, squawking turkey”.)

There's a lesson here. One's reading does not have to be confined to the commanding – and thereby discouraging –

heights of the truly great. Take a look also at what's happening on the lower slopes, even in the crowded troughs. We tend to think of ambition operating in terms of some ultimate destination – the Nobel Prize or bust! – but it also manifests itself incrementally, at the level of pettiness. To read a well-regarded writer and to find the conviction growing in yourself that he or she is second- or third-rate, that, in Bob Dylan's words, "you can say it just as good", is both encouraging and, if acted upon, a niggling form of ambition. (If it is not acted upon it becomes simply corrosive.)

As with ambition so with practicalities. It's a daunting prospect to sit down with the intention of writing a masterpiece. If it has any chance of being realised that ambition is best broken down into achievable increments, such as I will sit here for two hours, or 500 words or whatever. Keep these targets manageable and you will feel good about your progress, even if that progress is, inevitably, measured negatively.

The satisfactions of writing are indistinguishable from its challenges and difficulties. It is constantly testing all your faculties and skills (of expression, concentration, memory, imagination and empathy) on the smallest scale (sentences, words, commas) and the largest (the overall design, structure and purpose of the book) simultaneously. It brings you absolutely and always up against your limitations. That's why people keep at it – and why it's far easier to give advice about writing than it is to do it.

*Geoff Dyer is the author of four novels and many non-fiction books including *The Ongoing Moment*, *But Beautiful* and *Out of Sheer Rage*. His latest book, *Zona*, a meditation on cinema, will be published in February by Canongate*

2. Getting started

‘New writers ... dive in’

Mired in research? Fearful of failure? Procrastination is the writer’s biggest enemy. Fight it, urges **Jill Dawson** – a series of false starts is better than no start at all

Nabokov called it “the first little throb”. The first inkling of the novel you want to write. He was speaking of *Lolita*, of course. Something that beats beneath everything else; something troubling, insistent, itchy and physical: pain and desire mixed. In his earlier novella *The Enchanter*, which feels in some ways like an early draft of *Lolita*, the protagonist speaks of his “hopeless yearning to extract something from beauty, to hold it still for an instant, to do something with it”.

Maybe that’s what the desire to write a novel is. Trying to hold something still, pin it down, stick things (words) to paper. Maybe ... but plenty of writers, and I’m definitely in this group, couldn’t tell you at the start why they wanted to write a particular novel, only that they feel this throb powerfully.

I urge new writers to dive in. There is never a perfect time to write your novel, though writing students seem to believe there is. Begin today. That has been my consistent advice in the 20 or so years I’ve been writing, or teaching writing, or talking about writing.

I can, of course, see the temptations of not beginning. Chiefly, not beginning sustains the belief that you are gifted, that the novel – when you one day get round to writing it – will surpass all others, that you will suffer no rejections, that it will be published at once and be thereafter visible in every bookshop you step into, that you will never suffer a bad review or sit at a dinner party and hear the question: “So, should I have heard of you?”

Not beginning protects you from the disappointment – no, shame – of reading what you have written and finding it rubbish. It also prevents you from an equally disturbing possibility: discovering that you can write. What then have you been doing all those years? Success or failure can both be avoided by never starting at all – this then is the spell that procrastination casts. How to step out from under it?

The writers I know are all obsessive. The unpublished ones obsess over getting published; the rest about “this crazy obsessive business of trying to be a good writer” (in the words of American novelist Richard Yates). You could try to put this compulsive trait to good use. Yes, you might need to start with some research, but you don’t have to spend years on this before feeling ready to begin. You can also research alongside the writing, making the most of your obsessive qualities, which will keep the material fresh and give you something to do on the days when writing doesn’t go well. While writing *The Great Lover* I reread the poems and letters of Rupert Brooke over and over, which did indeed change the structure of the novel (I’d never intended to include Brooke’s voice). Surprise in fiction can be a pleasure for you as well as the reader. And conversely, if you’re bored, your reader will be too.

Shouldn’t you complete the research, plot it out, know where it’s going before you put finger to key? I know there are writers who work this way, but not being one of them, I can’t tell you about that method. It might suit you. But so might mine.

There is much anxiety created in new writers about writing the beginning of their novel, how the first line has to grab the reader’s attention, how they must open with a vivid scene or phrase, that kind of thing. Reading wonderful opening lines makes it look easy and implies that there is a formula for this – shock the reader by opening with: “Mother died today, or maybe yesterday, I don’t know” (Camus’s *The Outsider*), or stun them with lyrical virtuosity: “*Lolita*, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.”

Brilliant opening lines rarely come to the writer the minute she or he begins, so why worry, especially since it’s much easier now than in Nabokov’s day to make changes to a manuscript. The perfect opener is more likely to suggest itself after you have many more words on paper, once you know the characters well, once the whole thing feels thicker and

juicier and more developed.

Whatever your level of experience, writing a novel usually feels like a series of false starts. When we begin the voice sounds wrong, the characters don't "come through", the tone is wrong, even the year and the place you've put them in, all feel wrong. But how can you, the writer, know these things, see them, until you've put words on the page, taken a look at them? This is drafting. Resisting producing a draft means not producing anything at all ("Perfection is terrible ... it tamps the womb", wrote Plath). Is the prose alive or dead? That's all you need to know to carry on.

Most draft novels, like old bread, would benefit from topping and tailing. But you can't do that until there's something solid, some dry crusts to slice away. A rough start is unavoidable; a warm-up. There's no way to write a novel without being willing to do this.

The trick is not to care that it all gets pared away, not to mourn those thousands of abandoned words, those endless new beginnings. Weak beginnings are inevitable and essential. The first little throb turns into a steady pulse, a heartbeat, the tapping of keys. It's an austere and repetitive service, the writing of a novel. But, of course, there is joy, too.

Jill Dawson is the author of seven novels and editor of six anthologies of poetry and short stories. Twice nominated for the Orange prize, she has held many fellowships and currently runs a mentoring project for new writers called Gold Dust (gold-dust.org.uk). Her latest novel, Lucky Bunny, is published by Sceptre

Writer's workshop 1

These warm-up exercises will help you eliminate the enemy: blank paper

There are three groups of exercises here, representing different techniques for getting started. Do some from each group, because the aim at this point is to free your imagination and let it explore unknown paths. Think of these as nothing more than warm-up exercises and don't judge them as pieces of writing. The more you're surprised by what you find yourself writing, the better these exercises are working.

Improvisations

Improvisations are a way of tapping into the unconscious mind rather than the controlled conscious level. Improvisations can help you remember forgotten moments of the past and let you think thoughts that might have been censored or ridiculed into silence. Improvisations are likely to be your own ideas and your own natural language rather than secondhand thoughts and language borrowed from other books.

In the course of writing an improvisation, you're likely to write about what you're really interested in and what you're really thinking about. This will help to answer the question: "What should I write about?" To get in the mood, start with a completely unstructured improvisation:

1 Write for 60 seconds without stopping. Just write exactly what comes into your head. Don't worry about writing in proper sentences with proper punctuation.

Here's another kind of improvisation, one that gives you a starting point:

2 Write about yourself as you are at this moment, using all five senses. What are you seeing? What are you hearing? What are you touching? What are you smelling? Are you tasting anything? If something distracts you from writing, write about this distraction.

You can also improvise about the past. See what you start writing about when you do the following exercise:

3 Write the words "I remember" at the top of a piece of paper and then see what comes out. Then write the words "Yesterday, I" at the top of a piece of paper and see what you find yourself writing next.

Improvisation is all about hearing the voice of the unconscious, which we don't normally hear. One place we do hear it, though, is in our dreams which, for that reason, are often good starting points for writing.

4 Write about a dream you had recently, even if you can only remember scraps of it. Now look at the scraps: do any of them make you think of something else? Is there anything in waking life that they make you think of? What is the mood of the dream? Use the scraps as the starting point for an improvisation.

Some people write down their dreams regularly, often as part of a journal. This is a good idea for writers: a journal can be a grab bag of anything at all that you notice or think.

Your journal is just for you, so you can write it in any way you like and anything at all can go into it. You don't have to write in it every day, though the more you start doing it, the more intriguing things you'll start noticing. Once you have a journal, you can use a phrase or an idea from it as the basis for an improvisation, and later on you can ransack it for settings, characters and so on.

There's a point where improvisation is almost exactly the same as the process of writing fiction. Here's an exercise where they come very close:

5 Without trying to think of a story, describe a character: male or female, their age, race, occupation, physical appearance

and mood at this moment. Where is this character: city, country; inside, outside; alone or with others? Now describe the same things about another character. The second character needn't have anything to do with the first. Then, connect these two characters. Do they already know each other? If they don't, is there a way in which they meet each other? Write a page in which these two characters interact.



Use someone else's story

This is a kind of improvisation, too, but you're improvising on a tune someone else has already written. You don't have to worry about plot: that's already there. You can concentrate on bringing your own voice to the story and focusing on what it is that you find interesting about it. You might worry that if you're using other people's work, you'll never be able to work out your own plots. Don't worry about that yet.

1 Retell a newspaper story, a myth, a fairy story, a story your mother told you. Ask yourself, why have I chosen this particular story to use rather than another? Is it to do with the events? Or is it the people in it? Is it similar to something I've experienced myself? If it's sad, what exactly makes it sad? If it's funny, what exactly makes it funny? If it's sad, what would you have to do to it to make it funny? If it's funny, what would you have to do to make it tragic? The answers to these questions might suggest another way of telling the story that is further from the original: more your own invention and less the story you've borrowed. Retell it again, making use of the answers to the above questions.

Sometimes it's not the plot of someone else's story that draws you in, but the actual words the writer's used or a mood that the original has created. It's often hard to say just how it has been done but you might be able to borrow a voice you like by doing this:

2 Choose a piece of writing you like. Use the first sentence as the opening for a piece you write yourself; or take the last sentence of the piece of writing and use it to conclude your piece. Or just take a favourite phrase and improvise around it.

There is some magic about the rhythm of sentences, the way the words are put together, that can make a piece of writing very powerful and musical. There's no reason why you shouldn't borrow some of that magic.

3 Take a couple of sentences that you like from another story. Now, leaving the structure of each sentence exactly the same, replace the words with words of your own.

This next exercise doesn't just borrow from someone else's story but from someone else's life.

4 Eavesdrop on a conversation and write down what you can remember of it. Use it as the basis for a page of writing. Ask these sorts of questions to get going: what are these characters like? What sort of life histories do they have? Do they like each other, fear each other, despise each other, are they about to fall in love? What are they doing while they talk? Where are they? What are they about to do next?

Word games

No one expects great literature or anything very profound to come out of word games so they're a good way of writing in an unselfconscious way. In these exercises, the rules of the game force you to put words together and create meanings in ways you may never think of otherwise. Some of these might sound silly. But try them: you might be surprised at what you find yourself writing.

- Write a paragraph without using the letter "e".
- Write a paragraph in which the first word starts with "a", the second word starts with "b" and so on through the alphabet.
- Go through the dictionary and collect 10 words that catch your eye. Write a piece that will use them all.
- Take a sentence at least 10 words long, from anywhere. Then use each word in the sentence as the first word of a new sentence.

The results may seem to have no value, but they might inspire a future piece of writing.

The exercises that appear in this ebook are edited extracts from Kate Grenville's The Writing Book (Allen and Unwin)

3. Character

‘A kind of organised dreaming’

Strong characters are crucial to fiction. You can borrow traits from real life, but the best characters are born of a deeper human understanding, writes **Andrew Miller**

First, a note of caution. To slice up fiction into categories such as “plot”, “voice”, “point of view” or “character” is to risk presenting it in a way that neither writer nor reader normally experiences it. The suggestion might seem to be that the writing of a story or a novel is a strongly segmented or layered activity, something orderly, dry and technical. But stories, when they come, come in organic gobs, as though gouged out of the living fabric of world – character tangled with plot, plot with setting, setting with scraps of language embedded and so on. But laying that aside, that large proviso, there are a few remarks that might be usefully attempted under the heading of “character”.

First off (and at the risk of being punched in the face by some follower of the *nouveau roman* school), let it be loudly asserted that character, strong characters, are at the heart of all great literature and always will be. Plot, even in detective fiction, is a very secondary matter. Not many readers could outline the plot of *The Sign of the Four* but no one has any difficulty bringing Holmes and Watson to mind.

A writer who does not create convincing characters will fail. A writer who creates thrilling, troubling, seductive, insistent characters need not worry too much about any other aspect of writing. You do not need to know how to spell. You do not need to know much about grammar. You do not even need any huge sensitivity to language, though this is the other quality that really matters in writing; it is also, perhaps, the most resistant to any kind of formal teaching.

So having insisted so immoderately on the central importance of character, how in God’s name is it done? Luckily, the raw material is close to hand. For every writer, it is his own enigmatic being that constitutes the focus of his research. Year after year, he sits on a kind of umpire’s chair watching the antics of his body, listening to the bubbling of his thoughts, sifting the material of his dreams. And when he wants more – other bodies, other thoughts – he simply looks up at those around him.

Think, for a moment, of your own family. Almost everybody has one. You might never need to go beyond them. You could keep them all in a kind of mental aquarium, sketching them into stories all your writing life. Change their names, of course, their hair colour, their tattoos; move them from that little town in the south you grew up in to a little town in the north you once drove through and wondered about ...

But a writer is not confined to such a tactic. It may even be that such a tactic is not particularly common. In my own work I have very rarely set out to present a character who is knowingly based on someone familiar to me, someone whose name I might find in my address book. The great majority of my characters – and I would guess this is true for most writers of fiction – are “inventions”. They emerge, quickly or slowly, shyly or boisterously, in the writing. They are members of that shifting population of men, women and children (not to mention cats, horses, etc) who inhabit our inner worlds. Where they come from, whether they are curious versions of ourselves, figures out of the collective unconscious, reconfigurings of those we did indeed once know but have now forgotten, or a mix of all such, no one, to my knowledge, has ever convincingly answered.

It does not matter. No one writes for long without understanding that they are entering mystery and will never leave it. What matters is that we can, through unnamed processes, secrete these figures who will loom and mouth off in our fictions. It is not, I think, too much to say that it is a “natural” process, that we are, all of us, geared up for it, and that without this propensity, writing would be impossibly complex. We could not do it.

There is, of course, another great reservoir of characters: those ready-made for us in books. It is not that we intend to steal Mr Tulkynghorn from Dickens or Ursula Brangwen from Lawrence, but that such characters show us the dimensions of the possible. A painter who wants to paint a tree needs to do two things: look at trees and look at paintings of trees. The first task shows what trees are like, the second shows the possibilities of the medium. Likewise, as a writer, it is by

reading that you learn how, in language, a character can be presented – through dialogue, through action, through physical attributes, interior monologue etc – a process that continues until you have absorbed these methods, and they have become a reflex so embedded in your apprehending of the world that you will never notice anything about anybody without secretly assessing its potential for fiction writing. And this, indeed, we could call “technique”, though we should not confuse the method with the task.

At its simplest, its barest, characterisation is about a writer’s grasp of what a human being is. When we set out to write, we do not do so out of a sense of certainty but out of a kind of radical uncertainty. We do not set out saying: “The world is like this.” But asking: “How is the world?” In creating characters we are posing to ourselves large, honest questions about our nature and the nature of those about us. Our answers are the characters themselves, those talking spirits we conjure up by a kind of organised dreaming. And when we finish, we are immediately dissatisfied with them, these “answers”, and we set out again, bemused, frustrated, excited. An odd use of time! An odd use of a life. But there’s a courage to it. Even, perhaps, a type of beauty.

Andrew Miller is the author of six novels including Casanova, a fictional portrait of its titular subject, and Oxygen, which was shortlisted for both the Booker prize and the Whitbread novel award. His latest novel, Pure, is published by Sceptre

Writer's workshop 2

How appearance, action and emotion create convincing personae

There are four basic groups of exercises here. You will begin by writing about a real person and progressively transform them into a fictional character.

Appearance

The most obvious thing about a person is the way they look, so we'll start with that. Though not very interesting in itself, this is interesting if it lets us guess at something of what they're like.

1 Describe someone you know – a neighbour, a friend – in terms of their appearance: their physical characteristics, the way they dress, the way they move, objects they might have around themselves. Go through your description and mark the items that might be a clue to personality. One test is whether you can ask the question “why” about something you've mentioned.

Now look at the items that aren't clues to anything. Given that you know the personality of this person, is there any way you could change these inexpressive details so that they, too, become clues to personality?

2 Rewrite the description with this in mind. See if there's anything else you can make up that might be a further clue to personality. One way is to borrow characteristics from another person. Think about the people you know and put together a patchwork of characteristics, making sure each one is an indicator of the person's inner life.

Starting with a person you know well has the advantage that you're working from something familiar towards areas where you have to guess or invent. Now let's reverse this process:

3 Write a physical portrait of a stranger you've seen recently. Include everything you can remember, whether or not it seems significant.

Now use these physical facts as the basis for questions. Why does their hair look the way it does? Why are they wearing those clothes or carrying that object? Why do they have that expression on their face? Branch out with further questions.

It's easy to come up with plausible answers, so once you've guessed the obvious, try guessing at the surprising: see what other answers you could come up with for the same questions.

Person becomes character

With that first group of exercises you began the movement away from a literal portrait of a person. The next exercises go further in that direction.

1 Go back to the portrait of the person you know (exercise 2, above). Think of another quirk or characteristic – not one that the real person has. Rewrite your description so that it incorporates the quirk you've identified.

What you have now is no longer a real-life person but a fictional character. As the creator of this character, you know some things about him or her but other things remain blanks. Now you can discover, and invent, what they might be.

2 Sketch out a biography of this character: their childhood, home life, work, close relationships, family. Describe their environment. Then describe a typical day in their life, from waking to going to sleep.

Remember, all this is just background exploration. In a final piece of writing you might not use any of it, but as the writer, you should know it even if the reader doesn't.

We're starting to know a good deal about the external aspects of this character but the most interesting things about both characters and people are their feelings.

3 Start with one of the facts you now know about the character and write about how the character feels about that fact. For example, they might live in a top-floor flat but would really like to live in a small, wooden cottage with a garden.

Feeling is a source of great energy, but writing directly about feeling often doesn't work. One way to get the most out of the energy locked into feeling is to put the feeling inside a character.

4 Think of something you recently experienced that made you feel strongly. Take the same feeling but give the character a completely different cause for experiencing it. You might be enraged by the cynicism of politicians: your character might be enraged at the way the man in front is driving.

Write a short account of what has made your character feel the way he or she does and describe the feelings as the character experiences them.

Giving emotions to a character lets you express them to the full: since they belong to someone else, they can be as unreasonable as you like, exaggeratedly angry, ironic, sad or funny. You can use all the energy of your own feeling but it has a channel to flow through that will make the fiction stronger.



Character in action

So far this has been a very static portrait of a character and there's a limit to what you can discover unless the character can be put in motion. How do you get characters to move?

1 Take your character and describe him or her making a cup of tea, walking down a flight of stairs or waiting for someone. Everyone does these simple things slightly differently and expresses something of their personality in the way they do it. Your character will do the same.

Up to now, we've only learnt about this character through you, the narrator, telling us about him or her. Now it's time to hear the character's own voice.

2 Go back to the exercise above. Rather than just watching the character, this time let's listen to what he or she is thinking while the tea is being made. Describe the activity again, starting with the word "I".

You might have the character write a letter to someone or describe himself or herself to us. The way the character looks at other characters will reveal a great deal, too.

3 Get your character to describe the stranger you depicted in the first group of exercises. Your character may notice things you hadn't noticed or bring a different set of judgments to the person.

Write a description of the stranger from your character's point of view and see how much you can make the character reveal about himself or herself in what is chosen or ignored.

What people say is important but how they say it is even more important. Do the last two exercises sound like the voice your character would be likely to have, or is it still your voice? Would the character use words differently?

4 Rewrite the last exercise, trying to make the character's voice as convincing as possible and different from your voice. This will be the voice of the character speaking directly to the reader.

Manipulating the reader

Usually, though not always, readers have a feeling about the characters they're reading about: they like them or hate them, trust them or distrust them or vary in their feelings from page to page. In this sense fiction is like life.

But in an important way, fiction is different from life. In life, events just flow along; in fiction, they're shaped to a purpose. That purpose is present in the writer's mind and dictates the choices that the writer makes, many of them unconscious ones. A writer chooses to mention one fact about the character but not another, which means that the reader is only seeing the character through the filter of the writer's mind.

Since manipulation can't be avoided – it is, in fact, what writing is and why writing is different from life – a writer has to learn to be in control of that manipulation. A writer has to learn to make choices that will subtly direct the reader towards the writer's larger purpose.

The writer has two tools for directing the reader: what is described and how it is described. The previous exercises have covered the ground of what is described. Now we come to how it is described.

1 Go back to the first exercise in this workshop. Imagine that in the wider framework of your purpose, you want this character to be disliked by the reader. Rewrite the description, using the same details but expressing them in an unfavourable way. Now reverse the process. Use all the same items in the description but load them with favourable bias.

4. Point of view

In two minds

Learning to distinguish between point of view and objective truth is the writer's first step towards creating authentic, resonant work, writes **Rachel Cusk**

Everyone experiences the operation of point of view – how I think and see the world rather than how you do – on a daily basis, yet its function as a technique of prose writing is frequently misunderstood. Creative writing teachers sometimes seem rather embattled on this subject, insisting on the “rule” that the point of view in a continuous prose narration cannot move among characters, even though a great number of canonical literary works rely on the fact that it can and does. This is one of those “rules”, apparently, that is made to be broken.

Yet if one accepts that the construction of a literary work should mirror life as closely as possible, one should indeed start with the proposition that existence is bound to a single “point of view”. The human subject evolves from infancy out of its ability to distinguish itself from what it is not. The first difficult knowledge a baby acquires is the realisation that his mother and he are separate: he cannot control her by means of his own thoughts and desires; he has to cry in order to inform her that he is hungry. In writing, this separation has to be revisited: for invention to be possible, subject and object must be distinguished from one another.

But the writing student is very often reluctant to disinter this harsh human knowledge; indeed, part of the reason why he or she wishes to write may be to escape the very inflexibility that ordains the loneliness of the human subject, the “rule” that dictates that a person cannot merge with other people, that the world in all its reality will not act as a template of projected desire. There is a widespread belief in the power of imagination to unmake that rule, to transcend or transform reality. When children play, they use imagination to do precisely that; but the same student who wishes to reincarnate childhood creativity by writing is often then frustrated by the prose he or she actually produces. It doesn't “look” like what they imagined; however liberating it felt to write them, the pages quickly lose their magic.

The creative writing teacher is not mistaken in ascribing this basic difficulty to a problem with point of view, but it is often the wrong problem that is being identified. As numerous masters have demonstrated, there is nothing “wrong” with the narrative passing from Jane's point of view to John's in the middle of a scene or even of a paragraph. The problem arises where the concept of point of view itself – rather than any particular version of it – has been inadequately realised. What Jane thinks is one thing; what actually is, is another. Point of view, like all techniques of fiction, has to reflect our own experience of living, and our experience is as human subjects in a world whose objective reality we are unable to breach. Jane might like the Tuscan countryside; John might hate it; but the actual value of the Tuscan countryside is something that has to be established in the writer's mind outside of John or Jane's opinion of it. John and Jane can then be brought in to reflect, contradict or debate its worth, but if the writer has not managed first to separate John and Jane from the Tuscan countryside – to separate the perceiver from the object perceived, as the baby is separated from the mother – then the resulting fiction will seem “unrealistic” and dissatisfying. To construct a point of view, in other words, first you must establish what is not a matter of opinion, what is true. This is, obviously, a tall order, but it is nonetheless what a great writer spends most of his or her time thinking about, before constructing the story that will reflect this fundamental distinction.

There are writers whose opinions happen to chime with those of the majority and, while their mishandling of point of view can go unnoticed, the success of their writing depends on their remaining in “safe” areas. A novel in which a character takes an idiosyncratic attitude to the Tuscan countryside is more distinctive simply because the author proves at one stroke that he understands how to use point of view.

Some writers find it difficult or do not wish to relinquish their subjectivity: a more objective way of perceiving the world seems to them comfortless and cold. In this case the problems of point of view are often approached by portioning up the terrain of the novel into chapters or sections that “belong” to different characters. Sometimes these sections will be headed with the character's name in order to make the writer's position clear. The differences between Jane and John are resolved through enforced separation. The reader is made to travel between their points of view, spending half the time

with Jane and her love of the Tuscan countryside and half the time with John and his loathing of it. This may be a fair solution, but it can seem brittle compared to the great organic enterprise that is the novel at its best.

A novel dominated by point of view often lacks the feeling of space and freedom, of security in the world, that permits the reader to transcend themselves, to grow and change by living for a period in the narrative. A writer such as DH Lawrence, himself the most flagrant offender in the English language against the “rules” of point of view, offers this space and freedom in abundance; indeed, one is freer to hate Lawrence than any other writer I can think of, and this in itself is proof that point of view not only survives but is strengthened by his fiction. Lawrence’s prose moves through his characters like a river moving through the landscape, intimate with but never confined by them. One can learn from him, at least, not to be limited by point of view, just as we try not to allow our own or others’ perceptions to obscure or limit our true understanding of the world.

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Writer's workshop 3

Why changing your point of view can conceal or reveal hidden truths

Point of view can be paralysing if you think about it too early. For the first draft or two, write in whatever point of view comes naturally, or in many different ones if that's what comes out. Worry later about choosing a consistent point of view.

English grammar lets us write in three ways:

- in the first person, using an "I" narrator
- in the third person, describing everyone as "he" or "she"
- in the second person, "you".

First person

A story told in the first person has the limitations, and the strengths, of being filtered through the consciousness of "I".

This means that an "I" narrator can only know about events he or she saw. Otherwise the narrator has to rely on what other people said.

An "I" narrator needs to establish its authority for telling the story. Was the narrator actually there? If not, how does the narrator know so much? Is the narrator putting together evidence from somewhere else: what other people have said, letters found in an attic, messages in bottles? Or is the narrator just guessing?

Also, an "I" narrator tends to become a personality: it's an individual speaking directly to the reader, and a character in the story. So the reader tries to build up a picture of that "I": what is "I" like? Do we like "I"?

An "I" narrator is likely to have an axe to grind in the story because "I" was involved in it, even if only as an observer, or as the person who put all the evidence together. In that case, what motive does "I" have for telling the story? Does this narrator just want to get to the truth? Or do they want to talk us into something? Can "I" be trusted to tell the truth?

The kind of language a first-person narrator might use depends on who "I" is. This is not to say that the language needs to match up with the type of character in a stereotyped way: a first-person narrator who was a child wouldn't necessarily have to tell the story in childish language. But a child "I" using adult language would need to be made convincing to the reader: it's another factor the writer has to be aware of.

First person can give an immediacy, an idiosyncratic and personal energy to a piece of writing. It is limited, but limitations in fiction are not always a bad thing. The story may be more interesting, more dramatic, if it's told by someone who doesn't know the full story, or who gets it wrong, or who isn't telling the truth.

Third person

Sometimes a third-person narrator can be almost as personal as a first person, with the same sort of limitations – this is called "third-person subjective".

At the other extreme, a third-person narrator can be a God-like voice who knows everything and is equally in the heads of all the characters: "third-person omniscient".

Third person can lack the intimacy of first person, the sense the reader has of identifying with the narrator. On the other hand, a third-person narrative can be enriched by its flexibility – a third-person narrator can go anywhere, do anything, know everything.

Second person

Using the second person is a challenge. It's very limited in knowledge, and over an extended piece it's unsettling for the reader. It can start to sound rather bullying or it can force you to identify with a character you feel very much at odds with.

At the same time there can be an overwhelming intimacy about the second person which can make the writing very powerful.

The point of view we think in is first person – our own perceptions and our own words – so we'll start there.

1 Write a portrait of yourself – your physical appearance and your personality – from your point of view, in the first person.

It will have a fairly limited point of view, as you don't know the "objective" truth about yourself, you only know what you think. It's likely to have a kind of intimacy, although it might be critical as well as sympathetic. See what you discover when you do this:

2 Using the same basic facts and information, rewrite this portrait from the point of view of one of your parents.

The subject of the portrait, yourself, will now be a third person in the writing. The parent narrating will know different kinds of things and might have different judgments. They might conceal and reveal different things and for different reasons. They have a vested interest here, too: they are connected to the person they're describing and might feel ashamed, proud, responsible, guilty or self-satisfied. There might be some distance on the subject: this time the intimacy may be with the parent doing the narrating.

3 Now rewrite the description from the point of view of someone writing your biography, a hundred years in the future. This person may have access to all the above information and more, but might, on the other hand, know certain things.

This will be a third-person account. There may be no limitations to knowledge, and although there may still be judgments, the narrator won't have a personal stake in the description. The subject will be seen at a great distance and in an impersonal way; the subject will be seen to be just one individual among many, and all affected by the mood and theories of the times.

These narrators are all trying to tell the truth as they see it. But let's explore the murky depths of untruth.



4 Write a portrait of yourself, in the third person, using the same basic facts, in the form of an obituary.

No one ever says anything bad in an obituary. This usually means that the whole truth is not usually being told. Sometimes an obituary is just one long gush. A more interesting obituary is where the person giving it never actually says anything bad about the dead person, but you get the picture just the same. The pleasure is in reading between the lines.

5 Now we'll try the other end of the spectrum: write the portrait of yourself from the point of view of your worst enemy. It should still sound like the truth, but it will be slanted to bias the reader against you.

Have a look now at all these versions. Which one did you find most interesting to write or read? Which was funniest? Which was most enigmatic? Which was most dramatic? Did any of them suggest stories within stories, layers of meanings?

Once you've written a piece, in whatever point of view came naturally, you can ask yourself what other points of view are possible for the material and which one might work best. Some more than others will offer potential for suspense, drama, pathos, humour or polemic.

6 Write a summary of the Cinderella story from the point of view of Cinderella.

Think about what a different story it would be if it was written from the point of view of another character in the story: the Prince, the Fairy Godmother, the Ugly Sisters, the Stepmother. You could retell the story from the point of view of an all-knowing narrator who could look into the hearts of all the characters.

7 Retell the story from another point of view, or several.

Which version did you most enjoy writing? Which one flowed most easily? Which one made you think of other things you could write about? Which had most feeling?

5. Voice

‘Who are you really?’

Your ‘voice’ lies somewhere between your conscious and subconscious mind. Finding that place is a challenging exercise in self-confrontation, writes **Meg Rosoff**

Do you have a voice? Can you recognise a voice when you hear one? And while we’re on the subject, what does “having a voice” actually mean?

Poetry is a great place to look for a strong voice. How about:

How to Kill a Living Thing

*Neglect it
Criticise it to its face
Say how it kills the light
Traps all the rubbish
Bores you with its green*

*Continually
Harden your heart
Then
Cut it down close
To the root as possible*

*Forget it
For a week or a month
Return with an axe
Split it with one blow
Insert a stone*

To keep the wound wide open

Do you hear a voice in those lines? Despite being unable to pronounce her name, the author Eibhlin Nic Eochaidh’s voice is so clear to me, I’m tempted to offer her a chair and a cup of tea.

Many would-be writers spend far too much time nervously scabbling about for a voice, but the word itself is horribly misleading. “Voice” (unlike “power”, for instance, or “presence”) suggests a superficial quality, one that can be manipulated by having singing lessons, or by changing the tone, volume or accent.

There is nothing superficial, however, about voice when used in the context of writing. Your writing voice is the deepest possible reflection of who you are. The job of your voice is not to seduce or flatter or make well-shaped sentences. In your voice, your readers should be able to hear the contents of your mind, your heart, your soul.

So ... what is the essence of your personality? What is the clearest expression of your DNA combined with a lifetime of experience? What does the combination of nature and nurture add up to? In other words, who are you? Who are you really?

If you don’t know, you need to find out. Self-knowledge is essential not only to writing, but to doing almost anything really well. It allows you to work through from a deep place – from the deep, dark corners of your subconscious mind. This connection of subconscious to conscious mind is what gives a writer’s voice resonance.

Read a great writer and you’ll feel the resonance – it’s the added dimension of power that can’t quite be explained by

mere talent. An ability with words is nice, but it's not a voice.

Connecting with your subconscious mind is not easy. It requires confronting difficult facts – about yourself and about the world. Can you know who you are without understanding your own weaknesses? And what frightens you? Can you know who you are without understanding the evil, the selfishness, the cruelty of which you're capable? OK. And the goodness, kindness, brilliance as well?

Of course the biggest, darkest question of all is death. Not an easy question to meet head-on. Some people naturally confront death. Some seem incapable of not confronting it. Woody Allen says that when he was a small child he lay in bed, terrified, contemplating eternal nothingness. So, apparently, did William Golding. Many people, however, live their lives in evasion of the central fact of existence.

Of course it is perfectly possible to be a writer without facing death face-on, without years of psychoanalysis, and without a tendency towards depression. But the resonant, powerful, exciting voice that grips you in its thrall is likely to be a voice with a good deal of hard-won wisdom about humanity.

Which brings us to "throughness". "Throughness" is a word I've borrowed from dressage: "The supple, elastic, unblocked, connected state that permits an unrestricted flow of energy from back to front and front to back." Synonymous with the German term *Durchlässigkeit* or "throughlettingness", it is often used in conjunction with the word "connection" – defined as a state "in which there is no blockage, break, or slack in the circuit that joins horse and rider into a single harmonious unit; the unrestricted flow of energy and influence from and through the rider to and throughout the horse, and back to the rider".

Now think, for a minute, of your subconscious mind as the horse and your conscious mind as the rider. The goal is a combination of strength, suppleness and softness. If the rider (conscious mind) is too strong, too stiff or unsympathetic, the horse becomes unresponsive and difficult to control, or resistant and dull. The object of dressage is to create an open, graceful exchange of understanding and energy between horse and rider.

In writing, a powerful flow of energy between conscious and subconscious mind will result in extraordinary occurrences. Characters will behave in ways you had not anticipated. Twists of plot will astound you. The part of your brain that concocts elaborate dreams while you sleep will emerge in daytime, informing your story in ways you might never have anticipated.

A book written with an exchange of energy between the conscious and subconscious mind will feel exciting and fluid in the way that a perfectly planned and pre-plotted book never will. Writing (like riding, or singing, or playing a musical instrument, or painting or playing cricket or thinking about the universe) requires the deep psychological resonance of the subconscious mind. It requires throughness and connection, and only then will the reader feel the surge of power that a clever borrowed voice never achieves.

The good news is that you can achieve throughness by writing. Practice, in other words. Write first thing in the morning when your conscious brain hasn't quite taken over yet. Write letters. Or essays. Write and write and write, and then look at what you've written to find out who you are.

Last bit of advice? Stop thinking about your voice. Think about your life instead. Live. Take risks. Seek wisdom. Confront the unconfrontable. Find out who you are. Let your voice gain power as you go.

Then write your book.

*Meg Rosoff is the author of five novels including the bestselling *How I Live Now* and *Just In Case*. Her books have won eight major literary prizes including the Carnegie medal. Her latest novel, *There is No Dog*, is published by Penguin*

Writer's workshop 4

Experiment with your own voice and learn to recognise the voices of others

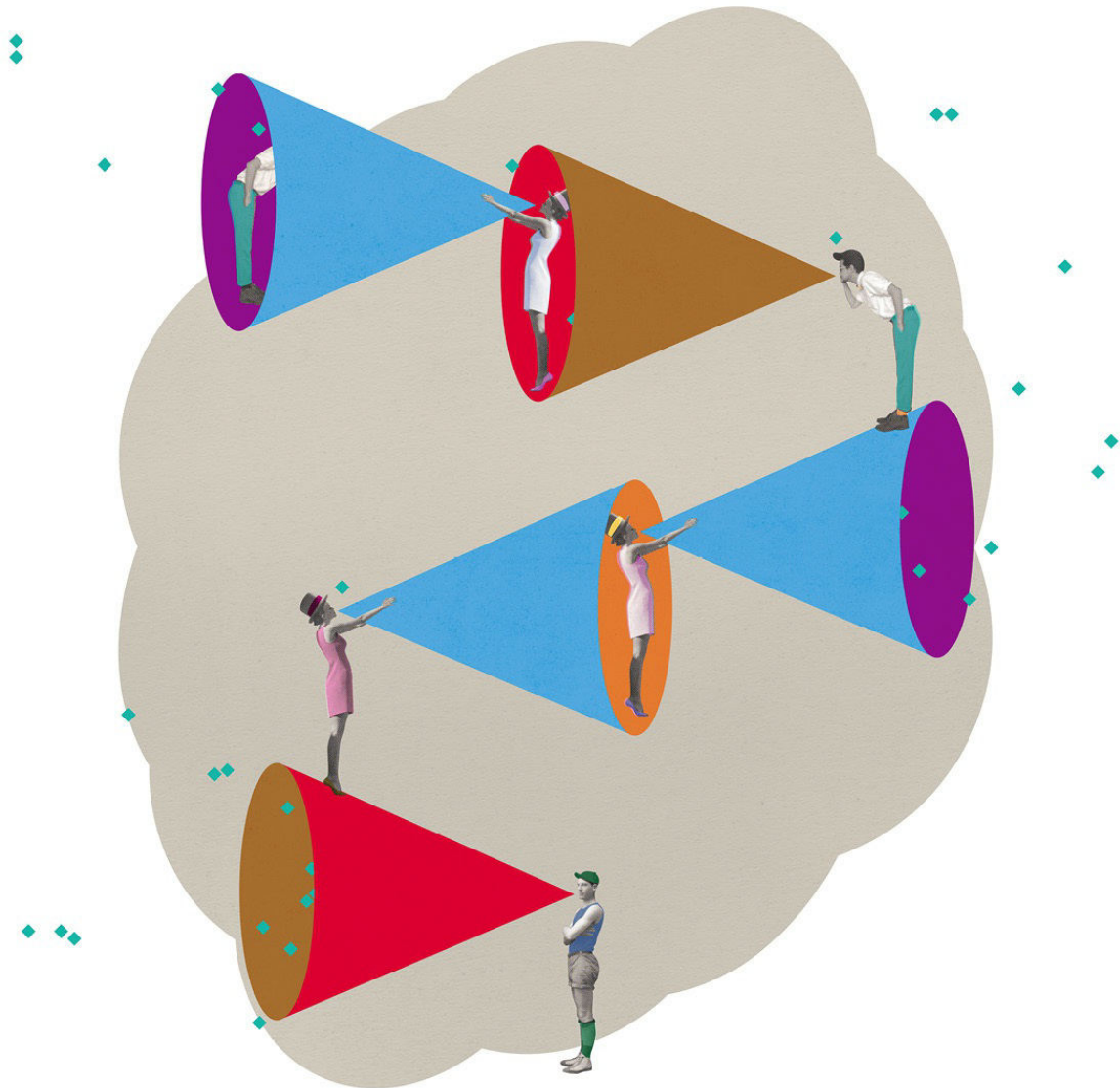
Like point of view, the voice of a story might come naturally in the first draft and never need changing. But you might also find, as you explore a story, that you need to rethink the voice completely. Point of view and voice are bound up very closely because the voice belongs to the narrator whose point of view we're hearing. If you change one, you're likely to need to change the other.

The voice that comes most naturally to you is your own, so we'll start with that.

1 Think of some example of minor conflict that you've been involved with in the last week with a member of your family or a friend. Write a short account of it as if for a diary you're keeping: you're writing it just for your own interest and you're the only reader.

The readership of this was you alone, so you weren't thinking about its effect on anyone else. You might have mentioned things that mean something only to you, and you might have used shorthand words that only you understand.

As soon as you start thinking about someone else reading it, you'd want to change things: not so much in the events described, as in the way you've described them. You might need to explain things more and you might want to make sure that your reader feels the same way you did about the incident.



2 Write the incident again but this time write it as a letter to a friend (not the one you're having the conflict with).

The voice is still yours but the writing has changed to take account of the reader. You have to be clearer and you might have to explain things: above all, you need to make sure that the reader sees the conflict the same way you do. You'll be choosing your words for their effect on the reader. The reader is a particular individual: the words you choose will be affected by what you know of that individual, too. Notice where you've made changes and what sort of changes they are.

Let's now borrow someone else's voice.

3 Imagine you are that person you've been in conflict with. In that other person's voice, write a letter about the conflict. The letter is addressed to you: this letter will be the mirror image of the one in exercise 2.

Now you're looking at the incident from the other person's point of view and you'll also be using their voice. As well as interpreting the events differently, this other person will express themselves differently.

Think about how that person uses language: do they use the same sort of vocabulary you do? Do they talk more formally, or less? Are they more articulate than you, or less? Are they rational or highly emotional?

So far, all these voices have been versions of real ones. Now let's use them as a basis for a fictional one.

4 Take the last exercise and list the characteristics of the voice – word use, syntax, imagery, punctuation and dialogue – and describe this voice.

Now rewrite the paragraph, exaggerating those qualities. Don't worry about going too far – this is only an exercise. Make the word use ridiculously colloquial or ridiculously formal; make the syntax absurdly long-winded or incredibly terse, and so on.

You might never have tried writing in such extreme ways before – you might find that it broadens your own range of voice.

6. Dialogue

When all is said and done

Dialogue is the lifeblood of your novel – the credulity of your characters depends on it. **DBC Pierre** shares his hard-won techniques for writing fluid, believable conversation

What characters say to each other in a book will make or break it. Their dialogues not only move the story along, mask and unveil truth, slow or quicken pace, cause or dampen conflict; they make the work credible or incredible.

And as if that doesn't already sound hard enough – they must also make us forget we're reading them.

A few basic laws govern dialogue and, once applied, their effect will be immediate. If you're beginning to make your characters speak, I promise these basics will help.

Unnatural is natural

Our programming as listeners and readers creates a need for technique in dialogue: these are two different things, as you'll discover when you try to write what you hear. At first I couldn't understand why the conversations around me wouldn't translate verbatim to a page; but a refraction effect applies, sentences strangely bend, like light hitting water. The first law then: natural speech looks unnatural when written.

Record someone's speech and you'll hear how peppered with reversals, repetitions and omissions it is. In its quest for meaning, the brain filters these out, delivering us a clean, packaged concept, which is great – until you try to write it. The way around this is concision. As an exercise, start with the dialogue you want to write, then remove every third word, or cut the sentence by half; cut it until the meaning no longer survives, then add back the few words which return the meaning you want.

You'll be surprised by how few words a sentence needs to do its job. Readers will fly through dialogue, it's one of the great pleasures of reading and one which puts them at the heart of the action – don't slow or stop them, except by design. Tight dialogue may look curt at first, but let it rest overnight then look again; you'll see that in the reading brain, economy is natural.

Show, don't tell

You might be sick of this catchphrase, but it's a rule which applies particularly to dialogue, as this is where you will show things rather than tell them. Where it might be easier to describe an action or setting in prose, the reader will become more involved in your work if your characters expose things through dialogue and action. For instance, this might be an interesting piece of prose:

Then there was Barry, wearing his usual sour face. Rather than complain of the cold, or put on a jumper, he had a habit of drowning his food in salt, as he said this stimulated the body's temperature-regulating mechanisms. Of course it was because he simply liked salt but was ashamed to admit it after warnings he'd received about his health. Still, he usually froze at dinner to prop up this facade.

Now note how engaged we become when we see the tale unfold through dialogue. This exchange says all the same things:

"Pass the salt," said Barry. Mother frowned at this and he didn't meet her gaze. "Not a crime, is it?" he mumbled, "a bit of salt? Against the cold?"

"If I thought it'd cheer you up I might pass it," she said. "Or you could just get a jumper like the rest of us."

"They say chillies regulate body temperature," chimed Silvia. "And tea."

Dan finished a mouthful, leaning back: “Tea regulates by making you sweat. He’s hardly going to sweat. Lucky if he’s any fluids left, I’ve filled the shaker twice already.”

“Not a crime, is it?”

“Ask Doctor Brice. Ask him after you’ve popped a vein.”

Beat around the bush

One element of spoken dialogue which we aim to preserve is indirectness. If you listen to how we speak you’ll note much of what we say assumes that we know each other. More than this, much of our speech is just a cover – for barbs, for questions, for things we don’t want to deal with directly.

This is all good in writing. It draws readers in because it not only seems natural, but makes them eavesdroppers, it gives mysteries to unravel, suspicions to confirm, which are as rewarding in books as in life. Your character Richard, for instance, in life or in a book, would never come out and say: “Nell, I hold you and your absences responsible for the pressures on our marriage.” Instead, we would guess it from an exchange like this:

Nell clattered downstairs: “I might be late home.”

“Could’ve sworn I left it around here.”

“Feel free to ignore me.”

“Works well enough for you.”

Let it flow

Flowing dialogue has to be balanced with letting readers know which character is speaking; but dialogue with too many “he said”s and “she said”s is irritating. It’s a perennial challenge to clearly identify who’s speaking without lumbering the exchange with repetitious words. While the beginning of a dialogue should firmly show who speaks and who answers, if the conversation continues you will need some new tools to keep it natural, unobtrusive and rhythmic.

One of a new writer’s first responses can be to substitute other verbs for “said”. While you can get away with a certain number of basic substitutions, they quickly wear thin. There are more elegant ways to identify your speakers.

First, don’t put all your attributions at the end – try breaking sentences with them:

“By the time I left the pub I could barely see them,” said Richard.

“By the time I left the pub,” said Richard, “I could barely see them.”

Try shifting attributions around to find where they fit best. Better still, attribute with action; take the opportunity to show what Richard is doing as he speaks:

“By the time I left the pub,” Richard lifted the blind: “I could barely see them.”

Tag your voices

Perhaps the sharpest tool in the armoury, one that removes attributions altogether, is the speech tag – this is one of the grunts or tics we agreed to eliminate at the beginning. Across the length of a story readers come to know a character by the style of their speech, by idiosyncrasies. Everyone has their habits, whether beginning replies with “Hmm” or “But” or “Well”, pronouncing things a certain way, or having a characteristic pause.

The key here is to pick one or two for each main character, and lead their sentences with them. Don’t overuse these tags, wait until you’re at full stretch to attribute dialogues – but then, with a tag each, your characters can chat at some length without needing to pause for a “said Richard”.

Don’t worry if the tags seem awkward at first – add them to mark for yourself who’s speaking; they’ll develop and

become more subtle as your characters settle into themselves.

Few tools in writing have such immediate effect on the page as these do, fuelling confidence, boosting the work along. We live in the best time for dialogue-heavy books – because it’s fast, and we’re fast, and it makes us eavesdroppers and ticks commercial boxes if you want to be published. Pace sells and dialogue is pace; you can still make unique, compelling characters, and you can still write a unique work around them – but a reader who falls into good dialogue on the first page of a book is in your pocket.

“Treat him bloody well,” said Richard.

*DBC Pierre is the author of three novels including the debut *Vernon God Little*, winner of the Man Booker prize, the Whitbread first novel award, the Bollinger Wodehouse Everyman prize, and the James Joyce award. His latest novel, *Lights Out in Wonderland*, is published by Penguin*

Writer's workshop 5

Speech borrowed from real life is often the basis for authentic dialogue

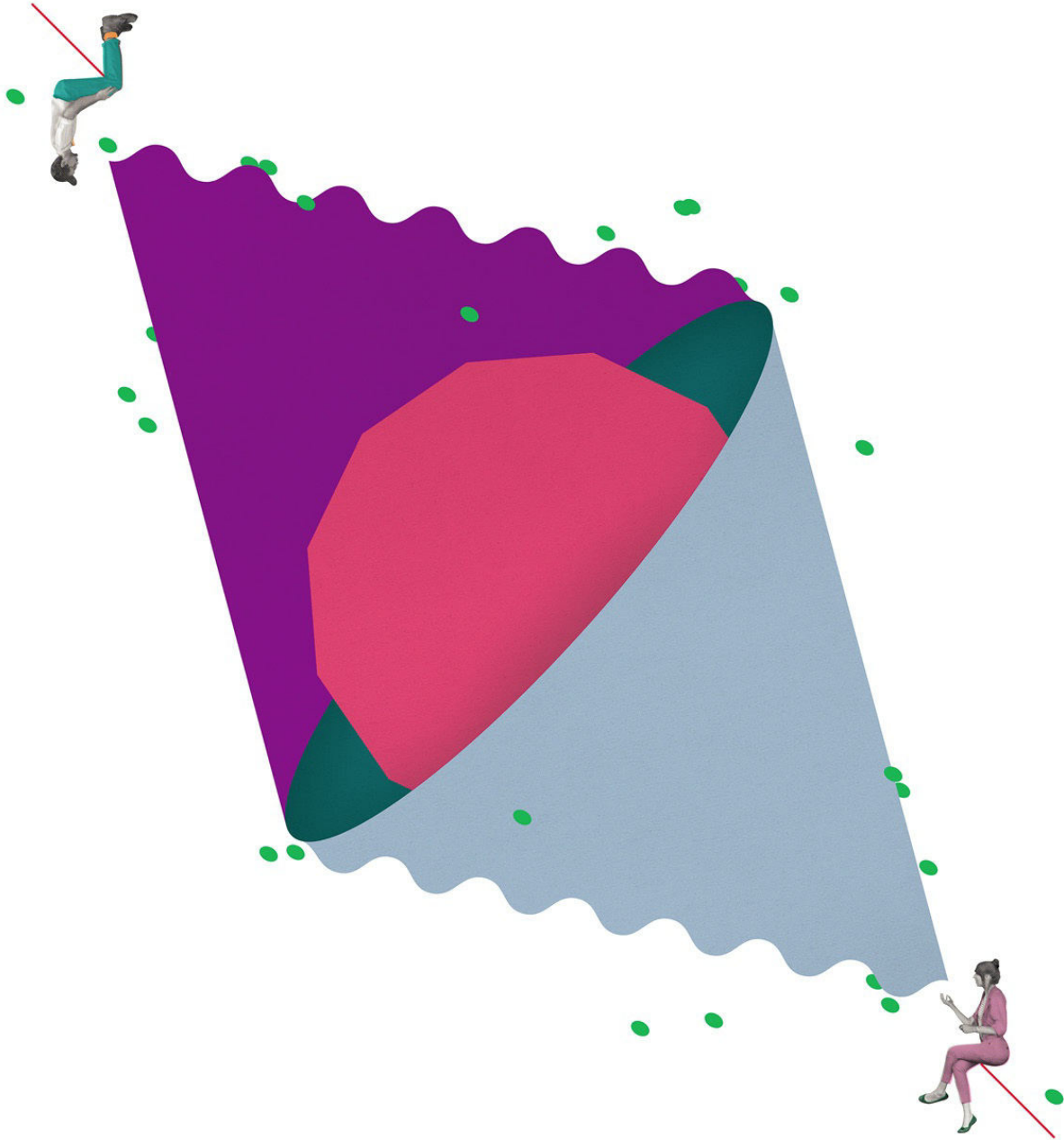
Dialogue that's completely invented, with no reference to real speech, is likely to be over-correct and a bit dull. The speech of real life is usually energetic, quirky and surprising. Writers might as well borrow some of that energy if they can.

1 Record a real conversation somewhere. It can be between strangers, or people you know. There can be as many people talking as you like. You can be one of the speakers if you wish. Then transcribe it as accurately as you can putting in all the "ums" and "ers" and the parts where it gets vague and incomprehensible.

It's very rare for a piece of real speech to have nothing interesting about it at all. The first thing is to isolate what's good about the speech in the transcript, or at least what's least dull. What's good might only be one phrase, but that's enough to go with. Ask the following questions:

- Which parts of the transcript, if any, already work on the written page?
- What is it that makes those parts interesting?
- Is it the subject of the conversation? Are interesting ideas being expressed, interesting anecdotes being told?
- Is it the situation?
- Is it the characters themselves? Do they sound like interesting people?
- Is it the language that's interesting?
- Is it unintentionally interesting: so repetitious or rambling that it ends up being funny? Full of tantalising half-finished sentences that make you want to know more?
- Is it funny? What makes it funny, exactly?

Now that you've isolated whatever is interesting about this speech, use it as the basis for a piece of fictional dialogue. You'll want to lose all the dull parts and exaggerate whatever strengths you've found in it. You're likely to find that these would have been difficult to invent.



2 Rewrite the transcript, shaping it to maximise its strengths. If necessary, make it clearer in meaning. This time, write it out as dialogue, using attributions rather than as a simple transcript, and add any gestures, expressions, tones of voice, etc, that are important. If its strength is something about the way the people are talking rather than what they're saying, experiment with ways to get this across. For this exercise try exaggerating everything.

This is now an edited version of reality. The next step is to make the leap into fiction, which may use very little of this real speech. Think about these choices that you might make:

- Would you use realistic or stylised dialogue?
- Would you use direct or indirect speech? Try both to see the difference it makes.
- Would you add more narration, and reduce the dialogue to a few lines? Or would you keep it almost all dialogue?

- Would you streamline it down to its basics, or would you allow it to blossom into a full-blown scene?
- Would you delete any characters, or add more? Would you combine several characters into one?
- How would you use punctuation?
- How would you use attribution?

3 Rewrite the dialogue, experimenting with these possibilities. Make as many changes as you can.

Now the real test: read it aloud. Even better, get someone to read it aloud to you. Make a note of where they stumbled, where the words went together awkwardly, where the sentence was too long or complicated to keep track of, where the words made unintentional rhymes or repeated sounds. Above all, just listen to whether it “sounds right”. If it doesn’t, it isn’t.

7. Description

‘By strength or submission’

You need to immerse yourself in the world in order to describe it truthfully, says **Adam Foulds**. Choose your words precisely and they will propel your plot forward

Description is a violent act. A painting, said Picasso, is “a horde of destructions”. Through description, reality is broken down and reassembled according to what you, the author, desire, what you want to see and feel. The resulting words must be formally satisfying, finding an artistic pattern that has only tangentially to do with lived experience per se and yet somehow renders it with the greatest possible intensity.

Description in fiction should always be at least as vivid as lived experience, generally more so. We make and drink a cup of tea without really thinking much about it. It happens in a kind of half-light of inattention, with things as they are taken for granted. But how much more brightly, gorgeously real it is when the cup isn’t even in front of us and the milk instead is added by James Joyce in *Ulysses*: “The sluggish cream wound curdling spirals through her tea.” Or later with this close-up on a *mélange* coffee (a kind of Viennese cappuccino) and a scone: “He sank two lumps of sugar deftly longwise through the whipped cream. Buck Mulligan slit a steaming scone in two and plastered butter over its smoking pith.”

Both descriptions are made real by their spatial precision (“spirals”, “longwise”), by their sensory alertness (“sluggish cream”, “smoking pith”), and by their music, attuned to the activities described. There are the long thick vowels of “sluggish cream wound curdling spirals” which contrast with the lightly sprung, quick vowels and vivid labial consonants of “Buck Mulligan slit a steaming scone in two and plastered butter over its smoking pith.” Sound, sense, space – everything arrives at once and the reader is engrossed with the particularity of the experience.

Description masters reality but it can only come after submission to experience, immersion in it. In *Four Quartets*, TS Eliot meditates on the difficulty of writing and refers to “what there is to conquer/By strength or submission”. There is a subtle insight in the second of these possibilities. Not conquest or submission but conquest by submission. Joyce owns the wealth of experience – that slow spiral of cream, the smoking scone – through his submission to it, his open, rapt absorption. To write good description, therefore, you have to love the world, to gaze at it as at a lover’s face, forgetful of yourself, immersed.

Description is, so to speak, a violent act, not only because it remakes the world but also because it dissolves and remakes the self. It is a kind of meditation, one that can procure bliss. Here is Flaubert reliving that liberation from the ordinary boundaries of being an individual person in a letter he wrote at two in the morning, after a day’s work:

No matter whether good or bad, it is a delectable thing, writing! not having to be yourself, being able to circulate in amongst the whole creation that you are describing. Today for instance, as a man and as a woman, as lover and mistress both, I have been out riding in a forest on an autumn afternoon, and I was the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words that they spoke to each other and the red sunlight that made them half-close their eyes, eyes that were brimming with love.

Notice how everything Flaubert talks about describing plays an active part in the scene: the light, the horses, the couple and their expressions. Nothing here is gratuitous and ornamental, everything is live and connected. This is important. When literary writing declines into fine writing it is often because description isn’t purposeful; rather, it’s filler, virtuoso, it’s pretty and in supposed good taste.

We can see how careful Evelyn Waugh is to avoid such a slackening in this deft paragraph from his 1934 novel, *A Handful of Dust*. The paragraph is scene setting, pure description, the creation of a landscape in which events will unfold and that contrasts with the environment in which the “hero”, Tony Last, will end up:

Outside, it was soft English weather; mist in the hollows and pale sunshine on the hills; the coverts had ceased

dripping, for there were no leaves to hold the recent rain, but the undergrowth was wet, dark in the shadows, iridescent where the sun caught it; the lanes were soggy and there was water running in the ditches.

Waugh avoids indulgence by not spending too long on this description. The landscape is conjured with rapid notations that follow each other in a single sentence. Waugh resists the temptation to rhapsodise. There is a definite throb of patriotic feeling for this place in that phrase “soft English weather” but what follows is not at all kitsch or sentimental. Certainly there is a note of rapture in that pale sunshine and iridescent undergrowth but it is earthed by the counterweight of dark shadows, leafless coverts, soggy lanes and gurgling ditches. None of the adjectives Waugh uses (with the single exception of “iridescent”) are high-sounding or unusual; they are commonplace and informal: soft, wet, dark, pale, soggy.

And this is all subtly to the point, contributing to the novel’s story. The reader here learns how Tony Last’s tenderness for this place is born of intimate knowledge. His relationship with it is a marriage, not an infatuation, and that makes his ultimate separation from it all the more painful. All this from a single sentence of description.

The current of story tends to flow more naturally through descriptions of action. Let’s end with a moment from Hemingway’s short story *The Capital of the World*. Note how strictly Hemingway keeps to the first person perspective, how sharply attuned his senses are as adrenaline flows through the character, how he notices only what’s important to the character, in close-up, how precisely Hemingway renders the spatial arrangement of the matador’s posture as he strikes, how he makes the unfamiliar familiar with a homely simile, how rapid action can be conveyed indirectly by the confusing gaps in events after the irrevocable has already happened. This is description at its most purposeful and it quickens the pulse:

He could remember when he was good and it had been only three years before. He could remember the weight of his heavy gold-brocaded fighting jacket on his shoulders on that hot afternoon in May when his voice had still been the same in the ring as in the cafe, and how he sighted along the point-dipping blade at the place in the top of the shoulders where it was dusty in the short-haired black hump of muscle above the wide, wood-knocking, splintered-tipped horns that lowered as he went in to kill, and how the sword pushed in as easy as into a mound of stiff butter with the palm of his hand pushing the pommel, his left arm crossed low, his left shoulder forward, his weight on his left leg, and then his weight wasn’t on his leg. His weight was on his lower belly and as the bull raised his head the horn was out of sight in him and he swung over on it twice before they pulled him off it.

*Adam Foulds is the author of two novels and *The Broken Word*, a narrative poem. He has received a number of awards including the Costa poetry prize, the Sunday Times young writer of the year and the Encore award. His latest novel, *The Quickening Maze* (Vintage), was shortlisted for the Booker prize*

Writer's workshop 6

Playing with the power of adverbs and adjectives

No description includes every single detail. Description is a matter of making choices: the choice of what to put in, and what to leave out, is the writer's. Everyone's living room is pretty much the same, but ask 20 people to describe their living rooms and you'll get 20 different descriptions.

1 Describe your living room in a few paragraphs.

You've chosen to mention a particular set of details: another person might have chosen a different set. Think about why you chose to mention the things you did and why you left out the things you did. Does that say something about you as well as something about your living room?

This is an undirected description: a description in limbo. Can it be made to reveal something further? First, can your description reveal something more about the room?

2 Rewrite this description, using basically the same information, but change whatever you need to so that the reader can guess at what has just been happening in the room. Use all the senses. You'll have to start inventing here, adding to the real information with pieces that you make up and leaving out anything that works against what you're trying to convey.

Instead of having to tell the reader what's been going on, you can let the description do so in an oblique way which may be more interesting.

There's a second level that the description can reveal: something about the narrator doing the describing.

3 Rewrite the description, showing not only what has just been happening in the room, but how the narrator feels about what has just been happening in the room. You might have to change what has been happening. You will probably choose different kinds of words, perhaps more emotive ones. You may vary the sentence structure by using, for example, exclamations, questions, very short sentences, and so on. You may find an image to focus the feeling. Make sure you're still describing the room, not describing feelings.

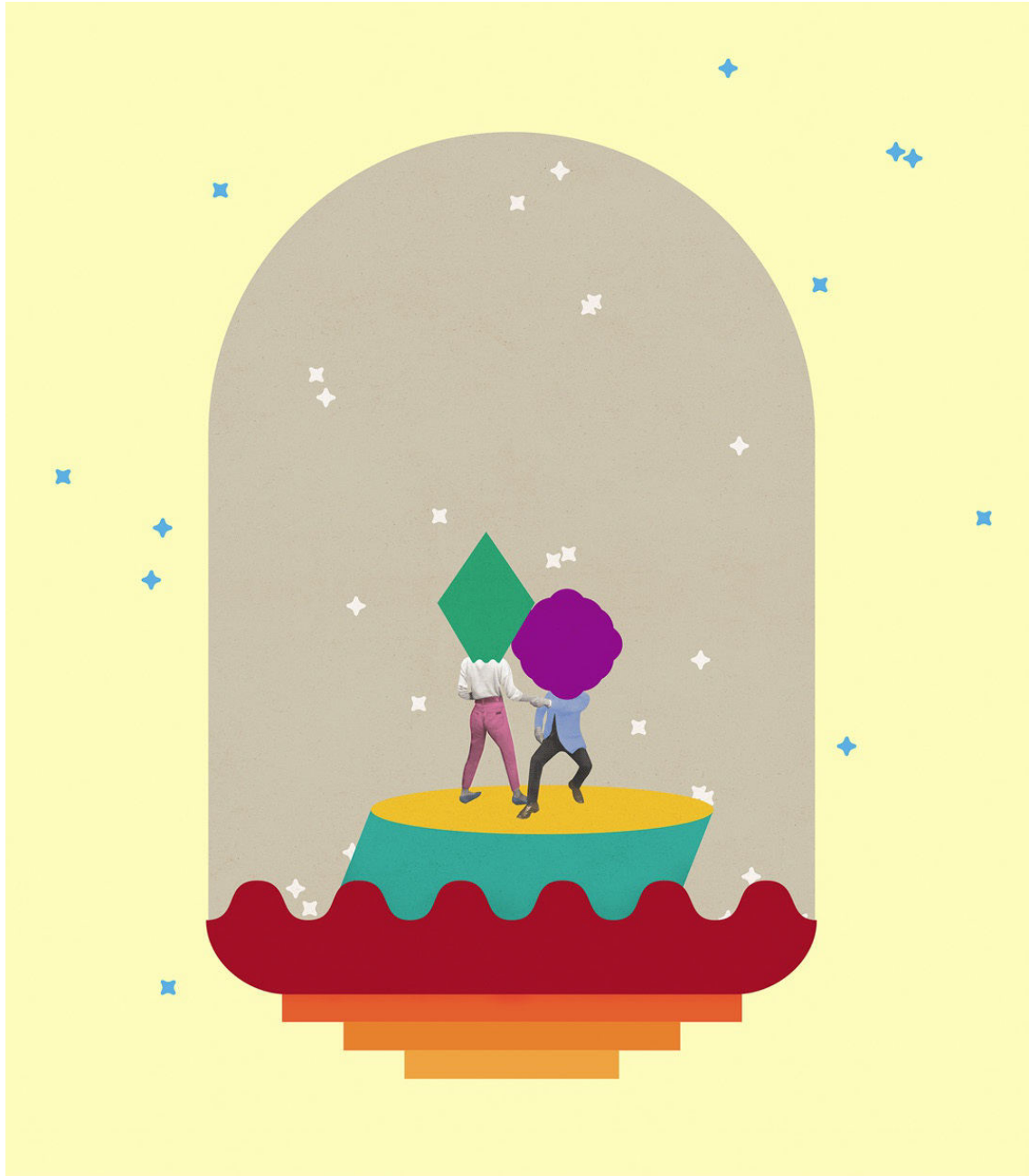
Now we will turn to people.

4 Take one of the descriptions of people you wrote in [Writer's workshop 2](#) and rewrite it without using any adjectives or adverbs.

This will force you to be very specific, and to "show" rather than "tell". If the character looks hungry or tense, what is it that makes them look that way? Without adjectives and adverbs, you're driven back to verbs as a means of expression and you might find yourself describing the character in terms of actions: body language, gestures, posture, activities. It forces you towards imagery, away from the literal into the metaphoric. For example, if you find yourself writing "his hair was the colour of dirt", rather than "his hair was brown", this is illuminating. Why have you chosen to compare his hair with dirt, of all the things you could have chosen? Does that indicate how you feel about this character?

As you write, you might find yourself being forced by the restrictions of the exercise to alter your character by inventing new details, things that can be described without adjectives and adverbs. You may find yourself writing about another character altogether. Follow where the exercise leads – the new character might be more interesting than the original one.

Now that you have an idea of what can be done without adverbs and adjectives, you can choose to put a few back in. They'll be the ones that you really need and they'll also probably be much more vivid than the ones in your first draft, because of the new insights you'll have had by doing without them.



5 Rewrite the description again, using whatever adverbs and adjectives you wish. You may find that this time you're writing about a third character, a composite of the two.

Description can sometimes be a trigger for a story: there's an impulse to write a description, and later on you see where it will take its place in a story.

6 However unlikely it seems, write a scene in which the character you've just been describing is in the living room you described earlier. Put the two elements together and see what happens.

The more bizarre the combination is, the more likely it is to be interesting. Now, of course, the description will start to become action, as the person and the place start to interact in some way.

8. Plot

‘Rising action’

The concept of plot has its detractors, says **Kate Mosse** – but every writer needs a taught framework of cause and effect on which to hang their words

A story is just the stuff that happened; plot is the intrigue of how and why. Yet in writing courses and workbooks, plot is often the poor relation of those apparently superior skills of characterisation, dialogue and style.

Sometimes plot dare not speak its own name, going incognito as “structure” or “planning”. Stephen King, in *On Writing*, calls it “the good writer’s last resort and the dullard’s first choice”. Ouch! For him, plotting is incompatible with the spontaneity of creation.

Yet a good plot is exactly what draws me to a novel in the first place. And keeps me there. Without it, no amount of sizzling dialogue or exquisite description or beautiful language is enough.

It wasn’t always like this

What are the oldest stories we know of? Aboriginal Dreamtime tales are rich in incident – the characters do things and their actions cause change. Greek myths are full of challenges faced and met by interchangeable heroes. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle himself refers to plot as the most important element of drama, trumping character or setting or even language. The 4th-century polymath coined the truism “beginning, middle and end” and recommended that the events should interconnect.

Fast forward to 1863. Gustav Freytag developed Aristotle’s three parts into five: exposition, rising action, turning point, falling action and resolution. The exposition introduces the main characters – who they are and what they want. The plot is about how they try to get it. In screenwriting, we talk about the status quo, inciting events, through lines and crescendos. It’s no coincidence that the story told in the sonata form I studied as a junior violinist goes like this: exposition, transition, development, recapitulation, coda.

Writing with purpose

A couple of weeks ago, taking refuge from the rain in a secondhand bookshop, I came upon a yellowed hardback published by Bodley Head in 1933. It was bound in brown ribbed board with the title, in red italics: *The Technique of Novel Writing: A Practical Guide for New Authors*. The author, Basil Hogarth, laments that: “A tradition has been allowed to arise [...] more by default than by deliberate intention, that the novel possesses no technique; that its craft inherits no secrets [...] that, in the phrase of Henry James, it is a ‘sprawling invertebrate’, a freak of literary creation.”

For me, a novel without a unifying plot is oddly without purpose – its individual stories lying adjacent but unresolved on the page. I sometimes wonder if the prejudice against plot is merely a new way to frame the conflict between literary and commercial. It’s nothing new. Swift v Defoe, Dickens v Thackeray. There are, of course, wonderfully picaresque or dazzling episodic novels that revel in their lack of plot. But most authors are not Cervantes or Laurence Sterne.

Plausibility

Aristotle advised that the story should convince. Characters must do and say the things that, if you met them, they would do and say. In Terence Rattigan’s 1952 play *The Deep Blue Sea*, Hester Collyer leaves her husband, an eminent judge, for a flaky former RAF pilot who will never love her with the intensity with which she loves him. She attempts suicide, fails and conceals the attempt. But, because she loves him, she has written her lover a note to tell him not to blame himself. He finds the note and is tortured by the realisation that he drove her so far.

This is the device – and on stage the scrutiny is intense. Does it convince? Without the stumbled-upon letter there will

be no chain of interconnected events, driving the action forward to the final, redemptive scene.

It's this tricky little word, "device". Perhaps there have been too many letters pushed under doormats and never found, cars that don't start, mobiles out of battery – what again? – and conversations coincidentally overheard. These are the dull tricks Stephen King rightly condemns. In the hands of Rattigan, though, every event has earned its place.

The promise

Plots may be visible. In Dan Brown's *The Symbol* we collect new facts like Brownies collect badges and every piece of information – how it is given, when it is given – has some bearing on the story.

Plots may be subtly concealed. In Agatha Christie's *Five Little Pigs*, Carla Lemarchant is engaged to be married but dares not proceed. Her mother was convicted of the murder of her husband, Amyas Crale, 16 years earlier. Poirot investigates. We learn everything that he learns, down to the central, incontrovertible clue – the words pronounced by Amyas shortly before he died – and we wonder. Of course we know that Poirot knows and that, in the end, Agatha Christie will keep her promise – the plot that underlies the story will be revealed.

I know very quickly whether or not I will enjoy a novel. There's an attractive conviction to the writing of authors that I trust – I know they won't waste my time. In the end, everything counts.

The spaces between

I'm not advocating suffocating novels, plotted into submission. Good novels are completed by their readers. Bad novels are completed by their authors: overwritten, over-detailed and over-plotted.

But plot needn't be a straitjacket, rather a sturdy skeleton over which the beautiful drapery of dialogue, characterisation, period and location can be shown off to best advantage. Then, if you are at all like me, when you get to the end and all has finally become clear, you can say to yourself: "Of course!" Because that's what plot is – the hidden chain of cause and effect that it takes a whole novel to explain.

*Kate Mosse is the author of five novels, including the international bestseller *Labyrinth*, two works of nonfiction, two plays and many short stories. Kate is currently working on the third novel in her *Languedoc* series, *Citadel*, which is published by Orion in September 2012*

The dark art of creating suspense

More than any trick or technique, what makes suspense so enthralling is empathy – crafting characters your readers can truly connect with, says **Mark Billingham**

I am often asked at events and creative writing workshops how you go about creating suspense. There was a period when, in answer to this question, I would talk about the tricks of the trade: the cliffhanger, the twist and the “reveal”. Such things are still important, of course, but I have come to realise that the answer actually lies in something far more basic, something that should be central to the writing of any piece of fiction: the creation of character.

The techniques mentioned above are, of course, all vital pieces of the mystery writer’s armoury and, as such, are components of the genre that readers of crime novels have come to expect. They are part of the package; the buttons that a writer has to push every so often. When a crime writer thinks up a delicious twist, it is a great moment. Time to relax and take the rest of the day off. I do think that it can be overdone, however. There are a number of writers who believe it is their duty to throw as many curve balls at the reader as possible. To twist and twist again. These are the Chubby Checkers of crime fiction and, while I admire the craft, I think that it can actually work against genuine suspense. Put simply, I find it hard to engage with any book that is no more than a demonstration of technique.

That said, the “reveal” remains a very effective technique, and one with which I am very familiar from my time as a standup comedian. It may sound surprising, but a joke and a crime novel work in very much the same way. The comedian/writer leads their audience along the garden path. The audience know what’s coming, or at least they think they do until they get hit from a direction they were not expecting.

The best example I can think of from the world of crime fiction is in Thomas Harris’s novel, *The Silence of the Lambs*. The Swat team have the killer cornered and are approaching his house. At the same time, Clarice Starling has been dispatched to a small town many miles away to tie up a few loose ends. A member of the Swat teams ring the killer’s doorbell. We “cut” to the killer’s ghastly cellar where he hears the doorbell ring. This is the moment when the dummy is sold and the reader buys it completely. The reader stays with the killer as he slowly climbs the stairs. We know he has a gun. We know what he is capable of. He opens the door, and ... it’s Clarice Starling! The Swat team are at the wrong house, she is at the right house and she doesn’t know it. It’s the perfect reveal and it happens at the precise moment that the reader turns the page. The best crime fiction is full of heart-stopping moments such as this.

The reason that Harris’s reveal works so wonderfully, however, is not just because of the sublime timing. It works because of the character of Clarice Starling; a young woman the reader has come to know well and to empathise with. Ultimately, this is where I believe that the key to genuine suspense is to be found.

This revelation happened several years ago when I was reading a novel called *The Turnaround* by American writer George Pelecanos. Pelecanos is happy enough to call himself a crimewriter, but he is not one overly concerned with the sort of tricks already described. There is usually shocking violence, often with an element of investigation in its aftermath, but his books are not traditional mysteries by any means. What he does do is create characters that live and breathe on the page. As I read, I realised I had come to know some of these people so well that the idea that something bad was going to happen to them had become almost unbearable. I was turning each page with a sense of dread and it dawned on me that here was the most satisfying way to create suspense.

These are crime novels, after all. The reader has seen the jacket, read the blurb and knows very well what they are in for. Yes, there may be redemption and resolution of a sort, but there will also be suffering and pain, grief and dreadful loss. You know it’s coming, but not when or to whom. The tension is real and terrible, because you care.

So, by all means throw in a thrilling twist every now and again, but not so often that they lose their power to shock. Time those “reveals” to perfection so as to give your reader a punch line they will remember for a long time. But above all, give your readers characters they genuinely care about, that have the power to move them, and you will have

suspense from page one.

Mark Billingham is the author of 11 crime novels. Winner of the Theakston's Old Peculier crime novel of the year award, he has tutored creative writing courses for both Faber and Arvon. His latest novel, Good As Dead, is published by Sphere

Writer's workshop 7

How to transform a trivial list of events into a deliberate, focused plot

The first step in designing a story is to get together a collection of events.

1 Take 10 minutes to write an account of something you did yesterday. Include as many different events, no matter how trivial, as you can, to give yourself plenty of material to work on.

Look at what you've got and how your piece works on the level of event.

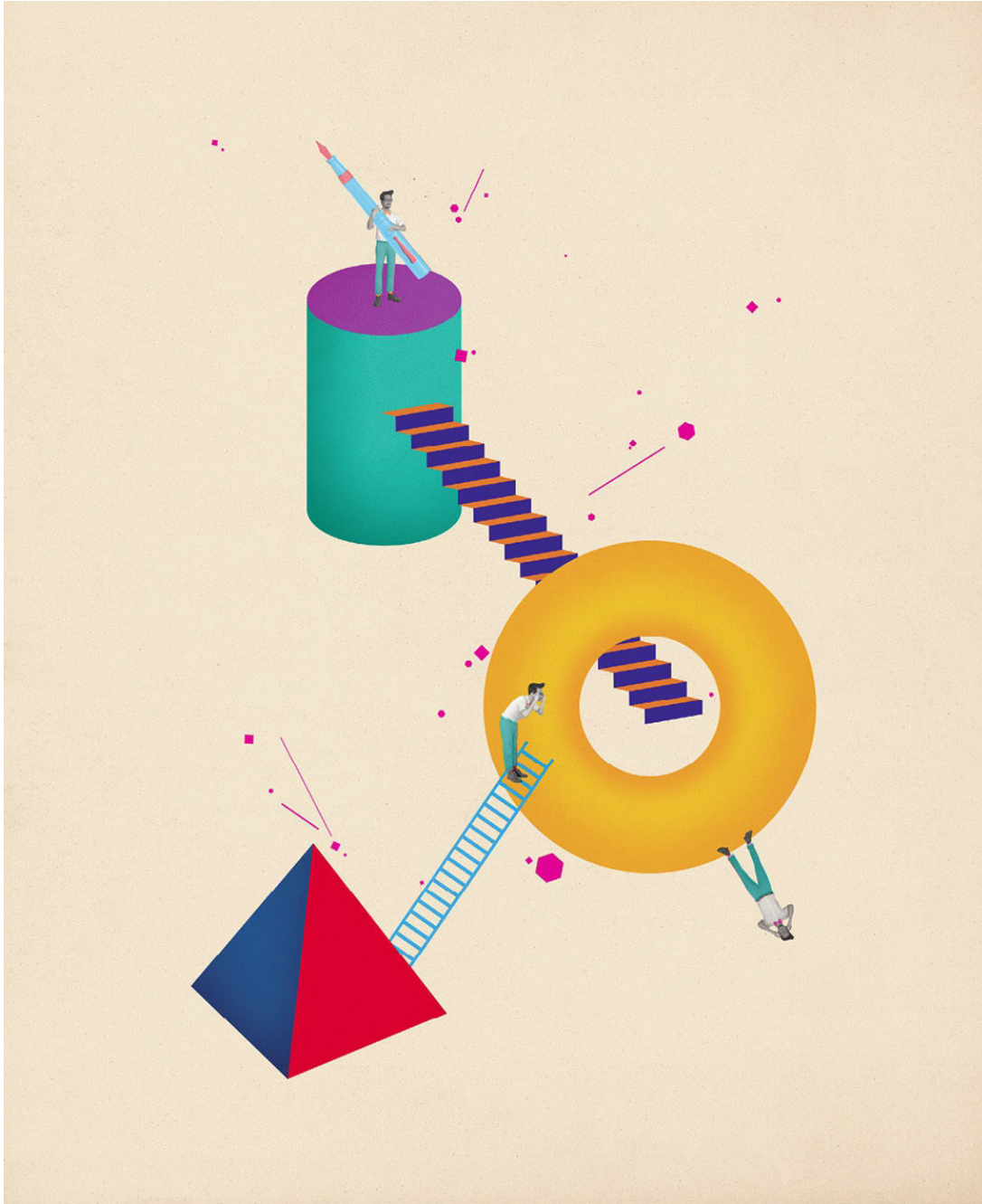
- Did you tell your events in strict chronological order or is there a point where you've darted backwards or forwards?
- Is there something in these events that you might call a "climax"? Is there some event that all the others led up to? Or are all your events of equal weight?
- Do you just have one string of events, or do you have more than one?
- Have you told another story in miniature, perhaps to explain something in yesterday's events? Have you referred to some past action, or some future hope?
- Is there a second character who creates a second mini-story?

2 Now rearrange all the elements that you have.

- If you have a strictly chronological piece, try putting the end at the beginning, or telling it backwards.
- If you have a climax, try streamlining everything else to make the climax more forceful.
- If you have several kinds of events, several characters or any references to past or future, arrange the piece in a flashback structure, a story-within-a-story or as two parallel stories.
- Where your piece ends, ask the question "and then what happened?" See if you can give the plot another twist.
- Invent new events and discard real ones as it suits your purposes. Try to rearrange the piece as differently as you can, even if the original structure seems the best.

3 Next, look at your piece from the point of view of secrets. Rewrite it with the following questions in mind:

- Is there something the narrator knows but isn't telling the reader?
- Is the narrator deliberately trying to mislead the reader?
- Is there something the reader knows that the narrator doesn't?
- Is there something that a character knows that they're not telling?
- At what point should information be given: should it all be laid out at the beginning or should information be withheld until the end?
- Is there something that should never be made quite clear, something that should stay obscure?



4 Lastly, let's look at the focus of the piece.

- Give the piece a title, or several titles.
- Write a one-line summary of the piece.
- If you can, give the piece to someone else and ask them to think of a title for the piece, or summarise it. Their way of seeing it may lead to new insights.
- Is there some unifying thread through all the events? Did they all happen to the same person, for example, or are they all tragic?

- Has anything been repeated in the piece: a word, a kind of action, a feeling, an image?

The answers to these questions will probably give you some idea about the focus of your piece. Now rewrite it, sharpening the focus. Remove or play down anything that doesn't help to focus it and invent anything you can to make the focus clearer.

5 The focus of a piece can change drastically as you explore it further. See if these shift the focus of your piece at all:

- Delete the first paragraph of your piece so that the second paragraph becomes the start of the piece. Does that suggest a different emphasis?
- Make the piece half as long. What have you left out?
- Make the piece twice as long. What have you added?

9. Revising & rewriting

Cut, then cut again

Every successful writer knows that revising is a crucial part of the creative process. **MJ Hyland** explains how to go about distilling your novel to its essential core

I've never read or written a perfect first draft. Perfect first drafts don't exist. And yet most writers, at the beginning of their careers, think they must. This intimidating myth of effortless gift persists because successful authors aren't in the habit of admitting to writing weak drafts and rarely show the public their mistakes.

"Every writer I know has trouble writing." Joseph Heller

The truth is that every beautiful, exciting and moving work of fiction is last in a line of at least a half-dozen carefully reworked drafts. Good writers are good because they have the right measure of intellect and talent for the hard labour of rewriting. Most writers haven't the stamina for this exacting work, or are too thin-skinned, defensive, or too impatient to face the bad news that they haven't got it right the first time round.

Rewriting accounts for the lion's share of a writer's work; the calculated and deliberate work that comes after the gleeful, and sometimes unconscious, first draft. Good writers, even the arrogant ones, are also humble and self-aware enough to know that revision is always necessary.

Fixing the first draft

"If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it." Elmore Leonard.

Here are seven techniques which are sure to make your job of revision easier and more effective:

1 Remove exaggeration (tell the fictional "truth"). *"The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink."* George Orwell

2 Cut out cliches. *"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."* Anton Chekhov

3 Remove your failed similes. A bad simile is embarrassing, like a long joke with a weak punch line, told by a nervous comedian. *"Kate inched over her own thoughts like a measuring worm."* John Steinbeck

4 Don't attempt a final version of the beginning of the story until you know how it ends. (And don't waste time fussing over the beginning until the rest of the work is done.) *"Be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid."* HW Fowler

5 Do at least one of the following to help you see your prose more clearly:

- Write by hand
- Use an ugly font
- Read your work aloud, or have somebody else read it aloud
- Write your second draft without referring to the first draft

"Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style." Matthew Arnold

6 Don't use more words than you need to and beware of fancy or ornate words. *"I never write 'metropolis' for seven cents when I can write 'city' and get paid the same."* Mark Twain

7 Make sure your adverbs and adjectives aren't muting your verbs and nouns. *"The road to hell is paved with adverbs."* Stephen King

An example of poor prose

This is typical of the kind of thing I see in early drafts every day, and it can be cured, in time, if the writer has the right kind of talent and intelligence, and by applying the above principles:

The smell in the crowded pub was so vile that I nearly gagged. It was like the smell of a camel that's been dead for three days. I whispered under my breath to Sarah, 'That smell is so disgusting,' and Sarah nodded so violently I thought her head would fall off, but she still looked beautiful with all her red curls wrapping round themselves like the golden tendrils of an ancient oak tree or like the snakes on Medusa's head that we saw in the museum last week.

This bad prose is very bad. The descriptions are overwrought, dilute dramatic effect and undermine authorial and narrative credibility. To say “nearly gagged” is not just clichéd, it’s barely credible. Something prosaic is better than the wrecking-ball of “gagged”. A more subtle and truer description of the smell would better serve to establish trust between reader and writer. Something like, “The pub smelt of whiskey and vegetable soup.” Most people know what whiskey and vegetable soup smell like, but few know the smell of “a camel that’s been dead for three days”. And the “crowded pub” is probably noisy, so the idea of “whispered under my breath” is tautological and untruthful.

As for the other errors, see if you can find them yourself and rewrite the paragraph knowing this: it’s crucial that the reader not only sees what you want them to see but also believes you.

“The best style is the style you don’t notice.” Somerset Maugham

Curing the fear of inadequacy

Many fledgling writers suffer from a problem that turns their prose into overblown mush: the idea that good writing is fancy writing, packed with complicated writerly flourish, staggering similes and metaphors, and that all great writing begins with a knock-out opening sentence.

Through most of my early 20s I thought the same. There was panic and lots of wasted, misdirected effort – time spent glued to the idea that I must prove my intelligence, at the cost of worrying about much more important things, such as character and truthful storytelling. I gave up chasing similes as good as Nabokov’s, and thought more about Chekhov’s compassion for character, and the brutal and compelling grace of Flannery O’Connor’s fiction. I stopped showing off and set out to write drama void of conspicuous artifice.

When I quit trying to sound like a writer, I became more of a writer. I took my desire to impress off the page and listened to Leo Tolstoy:

Drama, instead of telling us the whole of a man’s life, must place him in such a situation, tie such a knot, that when it is untied, the whole man is visible.

MJ Hyland is the author of three novels, *How the Light Gets In*, shortlisted for the Commonwealth writers’ prize, *Carry Me Down*, shortlisted for the Man Booker prize and, most recently, the Orange prize-shortlisted *This is How*. She is co-founder of [Hyland & Byrne: The Editing Firm](#) and her short story, *Rag Love*, was shortlisted for the BBC national short story award 2011

10. Publication

‘Ripeness is all’

Getting your book published is all about timing and tenacity. Agent **Clare Conville** and publisher **Francis Bickmore** ask: is your novel ready to become a commodity?

In the words of Louise Welsh: “Writing is no job for grown-ups. We do it because not doing it makes us feel worse.” Before you put yourself through the commitment and challenges of trying to make money from writing, ask yourself why you write and whether your work is really for sale.

The old adage that everybody has a book in them may be true, but of the tens of thousands of unsolicited manuscripts sent to publishers and agents every year, only a handful get picked up, and then an even smaller proportion get published. Is yours the sort of book you can imagine you or anyone you know picking up and buying? Or is it more for your own satisfaction, enjoyment, therapy? Publication is not necessarily the only worthwhile outcome.

No second chances

An agent or editor will almost certainly only read your script once. Choose your moment. Edit like hell and get informed opinions about what further work is needed. If necessary, pay for professional help. There is a demand for specialist agencies that offer this service because objective feedback is hard to come by. Close family and friends will usually only tell you what you want to hear rather than what you need to know. If you can join a creative writing course or a local writing group so much the better.

If the book just isn’t ready yet, bide your time and do further revisions. Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* was in genesis for 30 years before publication; Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* took 20. Ripeness is all.

Prepare your submission

A strong and hopefully successful submission to an agent or publisher takes work. It involves getting distance from the writing process and thinking about your book as a commodity. Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* is excellent on the necessary tension between artist and salesman. Ignore what you’re trying to achieve creatively and think about the book from the outside. What would make someone pick it up? Study the cover copy for authors you admire.

Researching your submission is crucial. Publishers and agents can sniff out a generic letter within a few lines. It may be hard to get to meet people in the industry, but you can professionally stalk them through various means. Don’t get too personal – the letter should be professional – but do get a name of an individual within each company. Find out which other writers they work with and what they have had success with. Pick out the books on your shelf that you think most happily sit alongside your work. Look at the publishers on the spine. If there is an acknowledgments section, the agent and editor will usually be thanked. There’s your lead. And when you write, explain why you have chosen them and why you think your book might fit their list.

Entitlement

A world-weary editor or agent can be startled back to life by a strong title. The title for a first novel has to work on a number of levels. It must grab attention, be memorable, it must convey in part a substantial aspect of the book and it must resonate at an emotional level, whether it is comic or tragic or a mixture of both. Take time to make a list of possible titles and ask fellow readers for feedback, then rework the title accordingly.

The right one-line pitch cannot be underestimated either. It may compel the first reader to put your novel at the top of his or her pile. It may carry through into the agent’s submission letter, it may be subsequently taken up by the editor as a way of persuading his colleagues that they must back the book and it may finally appear as part of the jacket copy.

Who do editors think they are?

Remember, both agents and editors are specialists, whose job is to find books they believe in and which they can sell. A rejection is not personal, it's a business decision – albeit a subjective one, and one motivated by passion.

Editors and agents are busy people. Reading generally happens after-hours and at weekends. Canongate receives around 1,000 submissions a year via agents and twice that come unsolicited. Of these we are looking to find around 30 new books a year. Perhaps only five are going to be from a debut voice. Conville and Walsh receives 4,000-5,000 unsolicited manuscripts a year and on average take on a maximum of five a year.

With all this in mind keep your letter professional, informed and typo-free. Also, keep it short. If you present your work well you can avoid putting people off before they've even begun reading.

Get out, don't give up

Writing is a lonely occupation. Find your community. Creative writing courses, masterclasses, writing groups and online forums are fantastic for finding others who can offer support, advice, tea, wine, etc. Also, for technical writing advice, check out the Paris Review Interview anthologies – probably the closest thing you'll find to a few hours in the pub with the greats.

Fail again, fail better

“We did find it of very great interest, but I regret to say that it does not appear to me possible as a publishing venture.” This rejection letter could have been written yesterday. In fact, it was TS Eliot rejecting George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Don't let rejection, or reports of a difficult publishing climate, put you off. There are miracle stories every year. One of our favourites is that of Roderick Gordon and Brian Williams who self-published *Tunnels* ([see chapter 11](#)). By a process of sheer determination the book came to the attention of Chicken House and has now sold over 1m copies worldwide.

Clare Conville is a founding agent at Conville and Walsh; Francis Bickmore is editorial director at Canongate Books

11. Self-publication

Make your own imprint

With digital printing and online publishing tools, it's never been easier to publish your own novel. Author **Roderick Gordon** shares his story and offers advice to debut novelists

So you've climbed that lonely mountain and written the book you always knew was in you. But what do you do next? Shove a few chapters and a synopsis in a manila envelope with a carefully composed letter and wing it off to potential publishers and agents? Then wait to hear until someone finally yanks it from the slush pile and all your hopes and dreams come crashing down as a rejection letter drops through your letter box?

Not for me that game. I'd had enough disappointment in my life at the hands of others when I was made redundant after nearly two decades of working in the City. I think I was probably still recovering from a bad case of burnout when I hooked up with an old friend from university, Brian Williams. Together, we wrote the sort of book that had lit up our imaginations when we were young – full of baddies, adventure and new worlds. Looking back I must have been out of my mind. With two sons in private school, a full-time nanny and an eye-watering mortgage, I should have been trying to find another job, and quick. But I didn't, because the book we'd called *The Highfield Mole* had become an obsession for both of us.

I talked to Brian about publishing it ourselves and he loved the idea. We'd have complete control over the process, from the editing to the design of the finished item. And the way we wanted it to look was vitally important to us. Our book wasn't just a good story, it was going to be an art object.

But I had no idea what it was going to cost. I found numerous "vanity publishers" online: you pay them to print your book for you, selecting one of their picture postcard covers, and you end up with something barely fit for the bargain bins in one of those remaindered bookshops. Then there were the subsidised presses who could produce a more bespoke item, but Brian and I didn't want our book to go out under one of their anodyne imprints. (This was 2004, so releasing an ebook wasn't a consideration.)

So I trawled the internet for a printer who would be interested in producing a small run of books, and also a designer. The designer I stumbled across, Ned Hoste, was a godsend. He helped me through the process of selecting a printer and the spec of the book. I had no idea of what "perfect binding" was, or what weight the pages should be.

After six months of doing nothing but editing the book and working with Ned on the layouts, it was time to press the button and send it through to the printers. You really can't imagine that moment unless you've been there. A book is never finished – you can always find a word to tweak, or something you think the proofreaders have missed. I held my breath and two months later a lorry turned up with three palletes of books ...

The books looked fantastic – 500 hardbacks with printed end papers, and 2,000 paperbacks, both versions with Brian's illustrations on colour plates. But there were far too many to store under the bed and we wanted someone to actually read them, maybe even give us a review. For a while we engaged in "reverse-shoplifting" by walking into bookshops in London's West End and planting them on the shelves. Of course we were giving them away.

I came up with the idea of having someone run a promotional campaign. Brian was initially against it because he didn't want me to spend any more money – I was already in for nearly £20,000 and counting. But I took on a PR company which landed us an article in *The Book and Magazine Collector*. There followed a feeding frenzy by collectors and dealers, many of whom offered to send copies to their contacts so we'd get a deal with a real publisher.

That's how Barry Cunningham (the editor who signed up JK Rowling for the first two Potter books) came to hear about the book. To cut a long story short, after some minor editing Barry republished the book as *Tunnels* in 2007. It achieved worldwide sales of 1m copies across 40 different countries. The film rights were also snapped up, and

preproduction is scheduled to start next year.

Making your debut

Would I recommend self-publishing? Yes – if you're mad enough to drag yourself up a second mountain having climbed the first, and you go into it with absolutely zero expectations. The quality of digital printing has improved such that it's indistinguishable from traditional litho printing. And while the price of paper stock has remained more or less static, print costs have dropped in recent years, so it's never been a better time to bring your book into the world. Before you do, here are five things to remember:

- 1** Cajole everyone you know to read your book before you publish and encourage them to be brutally honest with their feedback.
- 2** If you can afford it, a professional editor is worth their weight in gold. And you'll be blind to the howlers tucked away in your prose, so don't stint on a proofreader. Some typos and clunks will always slip through the net, but there's nothing worse than stumbling through pages littered with them.
- 3** Find yourself a good designer who can guide you through the process and ensure the end result is what you set out to achieve.
- 4** Don't break the bank to publish your book. I never thought I'd break even on the exercise, let alone earn a living from it, but the odds are you won't recoup your investment. If you're not a sucker for physical books then the ebook option is certainly one to consider. Your cash outlay will be less and there are already some incredible success stories from indie e-publishing.
- 5** If a mainstream publisher loves your book and waves a contract in front of your face, you'll have to radically adjust your mind-set and relinquish overall control. The publisher will rule on matters such as cover design and how your book is to be positioned in the market. Take it from me – this is not the easiest of transitions. Even with five Tunnels books under my belt, this is one piece of advice I have yet to accept myself.

Roderick Gordon's Tunnels series have been bestsellers throughout Europe and the US. Spiral, the fifth book in the Tunnels series, is published by Chicken House