

HOW TO WRITE AWESOME DIALOGUE!

FOR FICTION
FILM AND
THEATRE

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bonus
content!

TOM LEVEEN

**HOW TO WRITE
AWESOME DIALOGUE!**
for Fiction, Film, and Theatre

Techniques from
a published author and theatre guy

Also by Tom Leveen

Party

Zero

manicpixiedreamgirl

Sick

Random

Shackled

Violent Ends (anthology)

Hellworld

Mercy Rule

Those We Bury Back

Now You Don't

A Little Insurrection

Now & Then

**HOW TO WRITE
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a published author and theatre guy

Third Edition

Tom Leveen



FTJ Creative LLC

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tomleveen.com
fictionmentor.com

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What people are saying about Tom Leveen's dialogue, voice, and character:



Party (Random House, 2010)

“I must say that I’m absolutely **in awe of Leveen’s ability to build such distinct and totally believable voice** for eleven characters in one novel.”

~ fortheloveofya.com



Zero (Random House, 2012)

“Well written, **with a distinct and fantastically done voice**, *Zero* is an unflinching must read.”

~ agoodaddiction.blogspot.com

“[H]is **voice is fresh and strong and consistent.**”

~ scratchingcat.wordpress.com

“Part of **what makes the book, and the voice, believable** is Leveen’s ability to channel a teenage girl and make her real. It’s all there—the insecurity, the bravado, the conflicting feelings about sex, the sense that your whole life is in front of you, which is both exhilarating and paralyzing.”

~ The *Phoenix New Times*



manicpixiedreamgirl (Random House, 2013)

“[I]t’s the **relationships between the novel’s teenage characters that are the real standouts.** Tyler’s crass banter with his buddies, his snarky but supportive relationship with his sister, and his botched dealings with both Becky and Sydney are **entirely realistic.**”

~ Publisher’s Weekly

“Tom Leveen has **a unique voice** and writes interesting male characters, so I was intrigued to check out his latest book *manicpixiedreamgirl*. Leveen’s characters are usually creative types and not the typical leading men you see in YA....I thought the male voice in *manicpixiedreamgirl* was very strong and unique.”

~ thereadingdate.com



Random (Simon Pulse, 2014)

“Author Tom Leveen presents a powerful story with **a plot so real**, readers will be gripped from the very first page.”
 ~ readingjunky.blogspot.com



Sick (Abrams/Amulet, 2013)

“[Leveen] **really nails the ‘guy’ dialogue** as well—it is gross, colorful, and at times, downright funny.”
 ~ VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

“In an exciting take on the zombie novel, Leveen ... shifts to horror while maintaining **his trademark complex relationships and character-driven storytelling.**”
 ~ Publisher’s Weekly

“**Tom Leveen’s voice is truly one of the best elements...**”
 ~ blog.homoeoteleuton.com

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INTRODUCTION TO 3RD EDITION: ABOUT ME

Hello and welcome, fellow writer!

It's been many years since I published the first edition of this book. I can't say that anything in particular has changed in the way human beings convey stories to one another, but I have continued to learn about crafting a good novel. That's something we never stop learning.

Real quick: I'm an award-winning published author with imprints of Random House and Simon & Schuster among other traditional publishers, with nine legacy published hardcover novels since 2010. I've written for Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* comic book, had a foreign language adaptation stage play optioned, taught writing at the university level, and even been flown to Germany for a 10-day author tour in support of my novel *Random*.

Perhaps more importantly, I bring 22 years of live theatre experience as an actor and director to my novels, and to this book.

Why does that matter?

Theatre relies upon dialogue. Theatre without the spoken word is called . . . *dance*. When you've sat through hundreds of auditions, performed in more than 30 shows, directed more than 30 shows, and been in more one-off performances than you can count . . . the spoken word gets into your blood and onto the page.

I'm thrilled to bring new additions to this book, which is quickly becoming a go-to source for storytellers of many mediums and genres!

I believe you'll find this updated edition of *How To Write Awesome Dialogue! For Fiction, Film, and Theatre* a great investment into your career as a writer, wherever it is now and wherever it will take you. Let me know what you think of this edition. (Hey, I eat *Kirkus* reviews for breakfast, I can take it.)

Thank you so much for picking this up! Let's get into it!

~ Tom

PREFACE: ABOUT YOU

You are most likely a writer who has heard about or experienced the difficulty posed by writing really exceptional dialogue in your fiction or your script. Maybe a beta reader has brought it up, or maybe rejection letters from agents or editors have pointed it out. Or, hey . . . maybe you're already doing all right in the publishing world, and you're just looking to up your game when it comes to giving your characters dialogue that really clicks.

Dialogue can be tough because it has so many requirements to be truly wonderful. It must sound authentic but not overly realistic (think of all of our hiccups and pauses and repetitions and filler words). It must move the story forward while revealing character. It must entertain and provide information. It must have “Voice” with a capital V, and not sound derivative of other writers who went before you. And if you're working in first-person, then you have to do all of this within the narrative too.

Whew! That's a bunch for one writer to juggle.

The good news is all of these things can be learned, adapted, and modified to suit your requirements (for publication) and style (for satisfaction). I come to my dialogue somewhat rather naturally because of the stage, but acting and directing plays is not the same as crafting marketable fiction, and I've learned a lot over the years on how to manipulate this nutty language of ours to tell the best story I can.

So you can totally do this.

Now: as with any book or class on writing, this is not gospel.

Take what you like, and leave the rest . . . although I know from experience and student feedback there is something in this book for every storyteller, no matter your genre or medium. These are not rules, and if they were, you can find hundreds of novels that break them—including mine! The point is to find useful tips that will help your writing, and in turn, help you sell it, whether that's directly to an e-reader site or to a big New York publisher.

Let's go!

FIRST THINGS FIRST: AWESOME DIALOGUE COMES FROM AWESOME PLOTS

Plot = conflict = action = agency = agenda

Without an awesome plot on which to hang its hat, dialogue cannot be awesome. At best, it just sits on the page looking clever. (Ask me how I know...)

An “awesome” plot does not necessarily mean unique or original. For our purposes, “awesome” merely means strong. Well-defined. *Clear*. Our first and only real rule about writing of any kind is this: *Clarity is god*. Strive for clarity in all aspects of your writing, from the plot and theme to the dialogue and narrative.

Now: awesome plots come from conflict between forces we care about.

And conflict comes from two forces who are relentlessly pursuing exactly opposite things.

There are exceptions to this idea, but broadly speaking, all good conflict relies upon two forces who feel they are in a life or death situation, whether that is literally true or not. Asking a girl to the dance can feel like life or death!

I use the word “forces” rather than “people” to emphasize that conflict is not always exclusively between two human beings. A force could be a sentient computer (“Just what do you think are you doing, Dave?”), a shark, a tornado,

a *sharknado*, a horde of zombies, or the protagonist's own self-doubt. Most stories are about human beings in conflict, it's true; but there are always exceptions, and typically there is more than one conflict going on at a time.

The key here is that both entities want exactly opposite things. The shark in Peter Benchley's *Jaws* wants to eat the fine folks of Amity Island in order to survive; Police Chief Brody wants to stop him. That's it. That's our plot. That plot gets enriched as Benchley introduces the town selectman who stands in Brody's way of taking simple precautions (conflict!); then adds crusty fisherman Quint into the mix; his goal is the same as Brody's, but he is at odds with the chief from the get-go (conflict!).

Most genre novels make their conflict pretty clear:

~ Bad Guy Wants To Blow Up Planet, Good Guy Wants To Stop Him

~ Bad Guy Steals Person/Object, Hero Wants To Retrieve Him/Her/It

~ Good Girl Wants To Marry Good Guy, Bad Guy/Girl Wants To Stop Them

~ Good Girl Wants To Survive, Bad Guy Wants Her Dead

And on and on.

Two goals in opposition. That's all it really takes to have a plot that functions as the support system for writing our awesome dialogue. But in some novels, again, the force at work is not human, or is more esoteric than that.

Get Into A Fight: Heroes Take Action

Despite what we were taught growing up, when it comes to writing great plots and great dialogue, fighting is actually your *first* answer.

In the book *Audition*, a classic text on auditioning for film and theatre, author Michael Shurtleff writes, “A story full of people fighting for something is much better” than one in which the character merely allows things to happen, or worse, disengages from the scene.

Take for example the lottery scene in *The Hunger Games*. Imagine Katniss standing around sadly when her sister’s name is called to go fight to the death in the games:

“Oh, man. Dang. That sucks. Man. Bummer. I mean, I’d love to help, but like, what can I really do, you know? Man. Sorry, Prim.”

Do you want to read that book? No! We want to read about the girl who immediately shouts, “I volunteer as tribute!” She is *fighting for* her sister’s life.

Another thing Shurtleff says in his book is to make your characters make choices that allow for **maximum possible involvement**. Now, if we’ve done our job, our characters are in conflict, right? But it’s in our own nature to avoid conflict for the most part, so we can all too often endow our characters with that same response. We might say about our character, “In this scene, Susan wants to leave the house. She doesn’t want to deal with Frank’s attitude right now.” That may be true in the real world, but

in a story, it makes for disengagement. Katniss may very well want to run away from the lottery, but again, where does the story go if she just up and leaves?

Fight against these milquetoast motives for your characters! Make your characters make choices that allow for maximum possible involvement, like Katniss does by volunteering at the lottery. (It doesn't get any more involved than that!)

In the TV series *Friday Night Lights*, teenagers Tyra and Landry have been doing the “we’re just good friends” thing for awhile. Landry finally decides to get over his crush on her and begins dating someone else. Naturally, that’s the same time Tyra realizes she likes him after all. So Tyra decides to tell Landry her feelings . . . while he is out on a date with a new girl. Obviously, the smart move for Tyra is to wait and approach him while he’s alone—at home or after school, any other time than while he’s on a date! But no. She does it while he is on a date with someone else.

Why? Because it adds more tension and conflict than doing the smart thing. The writers make the deliberate choice for maximum possible involvement.

Do that.

Take a look at Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 7. (You can read an abbreviated version on page 58.) What do you notice?

Picture them in your mind. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth having this argument...going round and round . . . he says he doesn’t want to hurt the king, she says he must.

What's odd about this conversation if it were taking place in real life? Think about it for a second.

Macbeth doesn't leave.

Here's a decorated combat veteran who's been publicly praised by the king of his nation. He's no pushover. In the time and place where the story is set, if Macbeth truly didn't want to hear his wife's arguments for assassinating the head of state, he's only one firm "Silence, woman!" away from ending the plot right then and there.

But he doesn't. He stays in the room and has the argument. What's that tell us? That maybe he kinda, sorta, possibly *wants* to be convinced to assassinate his king?

It's not the only potential motivation, but it certainly allows for maximum involvement!

I bring this up because it's a common motivation problem actors have during scene work. It can also afflict authors who ask their characters, "What do you want in this scene?"

Since conflict is at the heart of every plot, and dialogue the mechanism by which the plot moves forward, much theatre dialogue is based on verbal arguments or disagreements. When the director asks, "What do you want in this scene?" and the actor replies, "I just want to leave the room," he's chosen the weakest possible motivation.

Why? Because nine times out of ten, no one is physically restraining him. If his Want is "to leave the room," in most cases, he can simply leave the dang room.

Now, in a thriller novel, let's say, where the protagonist has been captured by the bad guys and is chained up against a wall, it's perfectly reasonable for his Want to be, "I want to leave the room!" And everything he says and does should be geared to accomplishing that goal.

In a contemporary story, however, it's simply not enough for the character to want to "leave the room" or to "get away from his nagging" or whatever. Otherwise she would.

Think about real-life domestic squabbles. How often do we get to the point where we actually walk away? And how often is the attempt to walk away physically thwarted? (Of course, sadly, this does happen in some homes—but I trust that most of us have only to deal with some general bickering or arguments.)

We often stay in the fight. Because why? We want something from our opponent. (See how it all comes back to those goals?)

Unless someone puts a gun to our head, we're usually perfectly capable of leaving an argument—we just don't, because we want to Win.

Your characters want to win. Let them act like it!

Give Them Actionable Goals

“Taking action” doesn’t mean much if we don’t know what the action is for or what the goal is.

You’ve probably heard that your protagonist should have what is called a Want, or a Need, or a Goal. These are all interchangeable for our purposes in this book. But what we are specifically talking about here is a want, need, or goal that I can prove Yes or No by the story’s conclusion.

This is an actionable goal. (And that may be different than some of the other goals the characters have.) It is a concrete, black-and-white objective. “Survive the hunger games” is one example.

Here’s a paragraph from my first novel, *Party*. This particular chapter is told from the first-person point of view of a teenage girl who has recently lost both her family and her friends, and is considering attending a graduation party just to see if she is as invisible as she fears:

This becomes my new motivation: Go to the party. Walk around. See if anyone, just one person, says my name. Says “Hi!” Says “I had Spanish with you sophomore year.”

There it is. An actionable goal. We will know by story’s end if anyone says her name to her.

An actionable goal is something tangible; it’s something the reader can prove was or was not obtained by the character.

The point of the actionable goal is for the author to specify what exactly will constitute success or failure on the part of the character, good guys and bad guys alike. It is a yes or no question. Actionable goals are simple statements, such as “I want to go to prom with Billy,” or “I want to slay the dragon of Everspleen.”

The actionable goal puts an engine in the story. When it’s combined with a character who will stop at nothing to obtain that goal and a force that is in direct opposition, you’ve got a strong plot and therefore the basis for strong dialogue, because nearly everything spoken will be oriented toward that actionable goal.

In my second novel, *Zero*, the eponymous main character meets a boy, falls in love, straightens out an awkward mistake with her best friend, cultivates a new relationship with her mother...yet none of that is the actionable goal upon which the story moves. For *Zero*, the main thing she Wants is to sell a painting she’s done. That’s all. It’s that simple.

Some goals are stated outright, while others are implied during the story. In *Zero*’s case, she never says “I want to sell a painting.” Yet when she does or does not by story’s end, we will know that was the underlying motivation for everything she did in the story.

Is the novel about a girl running around to galleries trying to sell her art? No. Is there a lot more going on and a lot more at stake than this goal? Absolutely. Again, the actionable goal is there only to give the story momentum. It helps us as writers prevent the story from sitting around

talking to itself (which is exactly what the first draft of *Zero* did back in 1993).

Not all goals are clearly actionable, and that's okay. Characters can and usually should and typically do have more than one goal in any given story. The importance of the actionable goal is to give the story forward momentum.

Party has eleven chapters, and each chapter is told from a different character's point of view. As a result, I needed to come up with an actionable goal for each narrator. The second chapter is narrated by a sassy, punk-minded teen named Morrigan, who has a less-than-stellar relationship with her parents. I knew her goal needed to be related to that central issue.

The first Goal I came up with was: "Morrigan wants her dad to love her."

Nice. Nothing wrong with it. The problem is, I cannot prove to you, I cannot show you by the end of the novel, whether or not Morrigan obtains this Want or this Goal. It's too nebulous. We can make arguments for or against it, but I can't show it to you on the page. We all know that someone saying "I love you" doesn't always mean it's true, so it does not prove "my dad loves me."

Okay. Second attempt: "Morrigan wants her dad to notice her."

Better, but still not concrete. It's still a little vague in terms of what I can show you on the written page. How do we define "notice?"

So my final decision was: “Morrigan wants her dad to hug her.”

That is something I can prove happened or did not happen. It also at least suggests elements of the first two Wants: to be loved and to be noticed. Of course, a hug doesn’t prove Dad loves her . . . but that’s not the point. The point is her Want can proven one way or another, and it motivates what she does throughout the course of the novel.

Again, it’s okay if the Want is implied. In *Party*, Morrigan never states outright, “I want my dad to hug me!” But it’s pretty clear (I hope) by the end of the novel that it was, in part, her goal from beginning to end.

In the movie *Jaws*, does Police Chief Brody state outright, “I want to kill that shark”? No, but we don’t doubt that’s his goal from the get-go. As a matter of fact, sometimes you don’t want to state the goal outright, as it can come out a little heavy-handed. Look for any instance of a character saying, “If we don’t...”

**If we don’t stop that volcano from erupting,
the whole town will burn!**

**If we don’t blow up the Death Star, the Empire
will conquer everything!**

**If we don’t find Grandma’s murderer, one of
us will be next!**

See? There’s nothing wrong with statements like these, and they abound in action movies and certain genre novels all over the place, but try to limit or avoid them in your

fiction and instead let what your characters do show us their Goals.

Speculative genre novels, like science fiction or fantasy, typically have a built-in Want, usually around a main villain. “I want to destroy the One Ring” or “I need to kill Kurgan by chopping off his head,” for example.

In contemporary or non-speculative fiction, like romance or literary, there’s more room for subtlety. Again, both Morrigan and Zero’s Wants are not stated in the text, but they are in there.

Even without having stated it, the endings for both of these characters make clear what her Goal was from page one.

Which reminds me: these actionable goals should be easily found in the first chapter in which the protagonist appears. Often, first chapters serve to hook the reader with voice, character, action, or lovely description, and that’s fine. But do seriously consider getting that actionable goal into the text as quickly as possible.

Give The Hero Agency

There is one drawback to how I drew Morrigan's goal, "I want my dad to hug me," and it is this: It takes the responsibility out of her hands.

Protagonists should have agency. Agency is the force of will to make things happen. Revisiting Katniss at the lottery again, what's our opinion of her if someone else in the crowd nudges her and whispers, "Katniss, dude! That's your sister, volunteer!"

Ugh. Not much of a hero. Not someone we probably want to read about. We want to read about protagonists who take action, generally of their own accord.

Zero used to have a scene in the first chapter in which she tried to talk to Mike (the guy she ultimately ends up dating), felt like she failed, and ran away to her car, only to be stopped by one of Mike's friends who convinced her to go back in. It was an adorable scene with some clever dialogue and did reveal character...but it took agency away from *Zero*, and made her less heroic.

As much as it hurt me to kill my darling, I deleted the scene with Mike's friend and rewrote it so that *Zero* took full action and responsibility for talking to Mike on her own. It was a far better choice, and I don't regret doing it at all.

Protagonists with agency are a lot more sympathetic, which is important because they are going to fail an awful lot on their way toward their goal. That's what protagonists are for!

Ask the Major Dramatic Question

The “MDQ,” as we called it in theatre, has a few definitions, depending on who you ask. For me, the Major Dramatic Question of a novel or other story is, “The question asked by the story and answered by the resolution.”

The MDQ is related but not necessarily tied to the actionable goal of the protagonist. Sometimes they are one in the same, such as:

**Hamlet wants to avenge his father’s murder.
Does Hamlet avenge his father’s murder?**

Hamlet’s actionable goal and the MDQ are basically the same. But in *Zero* and stories like it, there might be a difference between the two:

**Zero wants to sell a painting.
Will Zero give up her dreams to be with the
only person she’s ever loved?**

These two items are intimately related in the novel, but they are not the same. Forming an MDQ allows the writer to get a little more nebulous in crafting the character’s Wants, while the actionable goal gives the story the gasoline to run on.

I hope no reader would ever say, “*Zero* is about a girl trying to sell a painting.” Uh...okay? Sounds, um...interesting? I guess? No! I want a reader to say, “*Zero* is a story about a teen artist struggling with her self-confidence who then

has to decide whether to follow her dreams or the dreams of the guy she loves.” That’s a lot more interesting, and it’s the kind of synopsis we get from phrasing a major dramatic question.

So Zero’s actionable goal is to sell a painting. That’s the one thing she pursues throughout the book, even as the story seems to be about her and her new boyfriend, Mike. What stands in Zero’s way of selling a painting? What Force pursues exactly the opposite goal? Her own self-confidence.

There are other conflicts in the story: between Zero and her mother, Zero and her former best friend, Zero and her would-be mentor. But each of these mini-conflicts between two people are in support of the main goal.

Advance the Agenda

Characters do not speak unless they want something.

Each speaking character has an agenda. Every line they say out loud advances that agenda.

That's not to say that every line should be, "I'm selling a painting!" or "I'm destroying the ring!" or "I'munna avenge my father's murder!"

It just means that if you are going to give a character space to speak up, it's got to be because she wants something.

Prince Swordbender's actionable goal may well be to kill the Abominable Sandman of Philadelphia; but when he complains to his team of misfit adventurers who've joined his quest that his feet are aching as they march, he Wants something else in that moment—perhaps to:

Hear some sympathy so he knows he's not as alone as he feels;

Lay the groundwork of maybe getting a foot massage from the nymph Gigglebottom (and maybe something more later tonight, *wacka-chicka, wacka-chicka*);

Merely hear the sound of his own voice since leaving the Forest of Silence.

Point being, the prince has an agenda as soon as he says, "My feet hurt." Any of these examples—even if they seem silly at first—can and should be tied to his overall actionable goal, or at least a subplot of it.

If, on the other hand, there is no real connection to the story—developing character, theme, or the plot—then maybe Swordbender’s foot pain should stay in the narrative rather than in dialogue.

We are constantly choosing what to say and what not to say in real life (some of us more and better than others). So too should your characters. Your novel can’t afford characters who talk just to hear themselves talk.

The talk has to matter.

Think of advancing the agenda as a series of rungs on a ladder leading to the big showdown of the novel. Each rung is critical right then and there, because without it, the character (and story) might fall. But the goal is always up there, in sight, and your protagonist is fighting to get to it.

Fall in Love

In *Audition*, Shurtleff also advises actors to make choices based in love wherever possible. This is good advice for us writers, too. It's one thing to say Macbeth is motivated by ambition—which is not bad, ambition is a powerful motivator. But it's another thing to say he is motivated *out of love for his wife*. After all, she is the one who talks him into killing the king. If everything Macbeth does from that moment forward is rooted in a deep and passionate love for his wife, his actions take on a more thrilling meaning.

In fact, it may even make his actions more believable. Most men, and certainly most soldiers like Macbeth, would never even consider killing one of their best friends who have been in battle with them. About the only thing that could realistically supersede that loyalty is the loyalty Macbeth has to his wife.

So when you're motivating your characters—good guys and bad guys both—motivate them out of love whenever possible.

Q&A

Q: We always hear about creating obstacles for our characters. What's the difference between an obstacle and a conflict? Is there one?

A: In my opinion, a conflict is between two active forces, while an obstacle can be inert (though that is not always the case). If your hero runs to the edge of a cliff while escaping the bad guys who are pursuing him, then the cliff is an obstacle, not a conflict. The cliff—a natural feature—in this case does not “want” to stop him.

Compare that to, say, *Twister*, in which ravaging tornadoes are almost characters in the story; they seem to have an “agenda” of sorts. As far as the stormchasers are concerned, the tornadoes “want” to keep destroying things and killing people, and our heroes want to find ways not to stop them, per se, but to understand and conquer them in order to save lives. That is a conflict. We see this sort of personification in many natural-disaster stories: asteroids, hurricanes, fires, floods...these have all been given personification in stories since mankind started telling stories at all, and when they do, they represent conflict.

Remember that a fire or flood is not itself a story. A fire or flood that prevents Jane from reaching her son's critical insulin dose is a story.

Q: Does the protagonist have to obtain the Want?

A: No. Romeo and Juliet don't. Hamlet does, but (spoiler

alert!) still gets himself killed, which could easily move that answer into the “no” column. Whether your protagonist obtains the Want doesn’t matter nearly as much as how hard she strives to obtain it. The harder she works for it, the more difficult it is, the more exciting your story will be. And “exciting” does not have to mean “swashbuckling.” You could write (and I have read) more than one story about something as simple as going to a school dance, or trying to meet a movie star, that had zero by way of combat, or explosions, or swordfights, or other “action,” yet was a novel that could not be put down.

That is what you’re aiming for, and the best way to do that is by having obstacles that make sense in the context of the setting.

Q: Does the actionable want always have to be something demonstrable?

A: No. I just find it easier. And we want to avoid “Wishful thinking” or verbs that are less strong. For instance, it’s fair to say about Zero that she “wants to be with Mike.” Okay...what does “be with” mean? They have sex? She moves in with him? She goes on tour with him and his band? He proposes marriage? What?

The reason I tend to emphasize this concrete Yes Or No approach is that none of those examples mean anything if they haven’t been agreed upon in the context of the book. Just look at the verbs we’re using (and again, this is for our authorial use, not something we necessarily announce in the book):

I want to be with Mike.

versus

I want to have sex with Mike.

I want to move out of my house and into an apartment with Mike.

I want to marry Mike.

The last three Wants certainly fall into the “be with” category, but they are specific and concrete and demonstrable. Specificity will come up again in this book, because it is so crucial to strong, vibrant storytelling.

I don’t think Rose ever says aloud in the movie *Titanic*, “I want to escape this life with Cal.” But it’s intimated pretty well in the words she does use and in the way she behaves. She in fact seriously considers suicide as a way out, for example. By the end of the story, we know if she escaped her life with Cal. Does that mean everything went according to plan? Not by a long shot.

Q: You talk about agency and characters taking charge, but the Hero’s Journey often includes a moment where the protagonist resists the call to adventure.

A: Yes, but the hero ultimately makes that choice. Luke Skywalker initially resists Ben’s urge to join him in Leia’s quest, but changes his mind after his family is killed. While it’s true that there’s “nothing left” for Luke on Tatooine, the fact is he still makes the choice and goes all-in. He is not forced on the journey. We want and need our heroes to make a choice and act.

Exercises

1. Print out a scene from your story. Use a pen or pencil to mark where your protagonist is actively pursuing her goal by virtue of what she says.

Can't find any such moments? Guess what you get to do tonight! As Morgan Freeman says in *The Shawshank Redemption*, "Get busy revisin', or get busy dyin'."

. . . Well, words to that effect.

2. Very simply: Write down A) what your hero wants, B) what stands in his way, and C) what actions he takes to get it. (It's simple, but not always easy!) These three sentences can form not only the basis of a query letter and/or one-paragraph synopsis, but can also help you clarify your protagonist's actionable goals.

3. Find a scene with a walk-on character, whether he has spoken lines or not. Reverse the choice you currently have; if he speaks, delete his line (or character) and see what changes. If he doesn't have a line, give him one or two that will impact the scene in some way—a critical interruption, a piece of needed information, expressing an opinion on the scene . . . whatever. Whether you keep this walk-on character or not, did his involvement reveal anything new about the scene or characters you did not know before?

4. Take two central characters from two of your different stories. (Not necessarily protagonists; just important characters. If you haven't written two stories, which I find

hard to believe, choose one from a favorite book, movie, play, or TV show.)

Put these two characters in room together from which they cannot leave. (I used a windowless, doorless concrete bunker.) Maybe they're trying to figure out where they are, how they got here, or how to get out.

Let them talk. That's all. See where the conversation goes, see what relationships develop. Whose point of view did you choose? Did one or both characters reveal something here away from their "home pages" that you might not otherwise have known?

I used this exercise with a female space pirate character set 200 years in the future, and Amanda Walsh, my seventeen-year-old protagonist of *Zero*. I actually did learn some things about both women that I ended up using in their stories. Not the dialogue itself, just the revelations of character.

Which just goes to show—these are exercises. Take what you like, leave the rest.

CRAFTING CHARACTERS FOR AWESOME DIALOGUE

Be the Star of the Show

Characters do not speak unless they want something. Every character who shows up in your novel has an agenda, and speaks to advance that agenda.

Pick any Act from your favorite Shakespearean play. Can you find a scene in which everyone in the scene is perfectly happy, with no goal? Probably not. Again, every character in Shakespeare's scenes has an agenda—which is just another word for Goal—and every time someone speaks, he or she is advancing that agenda.

Sir Anthony Hopkins, perhaps most famous for his role as Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence Of The Lambs*, grew up acting in live theatre. He told an anecdote about being in a play with Sir Laurence Olivier when Hopkins was a young actor and went to Olivier for advice.

According to Hopkins, Olivier said to him, “You’re the star of the show.” Hopkins, who had a very small role, said, “*What?*” And Olivier said, “Well, you’re the only one speaking at the moment.”

I can vouch for this. No matter how many people I have ever been on stage with at one time, when I spoke a line, every eye in the theater was on me. For that brief moment, I was the star.

The same is true in the written word. When a character

speaks, he or she is the star of the story for that one moment. Think about it: If you have a restaurant server come up to pour more coffee during a scene set in a diner, and the server asks your protagonist, “Can I get you some more coffee?” will the reader skip over her line because she’s “just the server”? No! If you, the author, make the server speak, even if it’s just one line, then it must be because the server’s dialogue is moving the story forward or revealing something in the scene.

Note, for example, the difference between:

“Can I get you some more coffee?”

and

“You look like you could use some more coffee.”

Or even this:

“You look like you need something stronger than coffee.”

While each of those lines appear to be synonymous, each has a slightly different impact. The second and third variation reveal much more about the character she’s talking to than the first one does. Other characters often can and should reveal more about the protagonist than the protagonist can reveal about herself.

What the Hopkins anecdote emphasizes for us as fiction writers is this: If a character speaks, she is the star of that

moment, no matter how brief, no matter how little she says. So ask yourself if the server should be given a line. Her one line of dialogue—“Can I get you some more coffee?”—has to serve a purpose, or it shouldn’t be there.

When she speaks, she is the star. Do you want her upstaging or interrupting the scene happening between your two main characters?

It’s fine if you *do* want that. I’m not saying to cut out any character who only has a line or two of dialogue. On the contrary, I’m pointing out that any character who speaks in the story is taking up valuable real estate in your novel and his words need to serve a purpose.

When the server says, “Can I get you some more coffee?” does her interruption come at a key moment in the scene, so your protagonist can use the distraction to sort out his thoughts (or pull a concealed weapon)? Does the server’s perfume remind him of his ex-wife, and thus alter the way the scene was headed? Did you give the server that perfume specifically to put that shift in this scene?

Like every other choice we’re talking about in this book, these one-line “stars” must be deliberate choices on your part. If you originally put the line of dialogue in the story because you, the author, needed to buy yourself some time while you were typing away in your local coffee shop, that’s fine. In revision, take it out if it doesn’t further the story.

Be Aware of Point of View

Every novel has a point of view, and the world should be seen through that point of view. That point of view needs to be consistent, but also contextualized.

For *Zero*, my agent at the time said it was very good, and she was very excited about it, but that there was one big problem:

My protagonist happens to be a 17-year-old-girl. That's not a problem (I happen to write 17-year-old girls really well, I don't know why, it's just a thing). The problem was I was describing things like a thirty-something-year-old guy, which is what I was at the time.

To really nail Voice, you have to inhabit the mind of the narrator, whether the story is in first- or third-person. It's vital to the story's success to have a strong, memorable voice in first-person, of course, but don't neglect this in third-person voice too.

Even when writing in the third-person omniscient, you are speaking from someone's point of view. Let's say you have a scene in which a war-hardened general is talking to his seven-year-old granddaughter, and you are using third-person omniscient. The third-person narrator who is showing us the general's thoughts will not describe things as being sparkly, magical, or full of ponies. (Most likely. I guess it depends on your genre, but you get the point.)

In *Zero*, my agent rightly noted that there's a difference

between a 30-year-old male having a good day describing a rainbow arching over a mountain, and a 17-year-old female having a *bad* day describing the same thing.

You must use metaphors and similes and word choices that the character would use, or the dialogue or narrative will sound an off-note to readers.

Examine Your Setting

Where your scene is set—where the characters are physically located in the storyworld—changes their dialogue.

This may already come naturally to you, because it's a natural thing in our day-to-day life. Having a difficult conversation with a romantic partner comes out of our mouths one way if it's at the end of a long day at work versus in the middle of a comfy Sunday picnic away from the children.

Or, as a kid, you knew instinctively when and where to ask for something, right? As an adult at work, you knew when to ask the boss for a raise and when not to. That's because setting changes everything.

The difference here is, as a kid or an employee, we're *waiting* for the best setting to ask for what we want. As an author, you should be *forcing* your characters into settings that get the most power or momentum out of the scene.

Changing your setting often helps with scenes that don't seem to be working for reasons you or other readers can't quite identify. If a scene isn't landing properly, simply try moving it to another place. Try *many* different places, and see what happens.

Here's a quick exercise:

Write a scene between a teenage boy and teenage girl who have recently begun dating each other. They are going to have a talk about where their budding romance is headed.

WAIT! Don't write that scene quite yet. Without giving you anything else to work with, can you hear those two characters in your head?

What you're hearing is called your Voice. Voice is not the same as dialogue, but I wanted to bring this up, because we'll be coming back to it later.

So we have our two young lovebirds. Can you hear what they say? How they say it?

But more to the current point: Where did you set them? Where was the first place that came to mind?

Let's try some specific places, and listen (in your head) for how their dialogue sounds different.

1. Set the scene in the boy's house. In his bedroom. After dark. On a Saturday night. And no one else is home...

Tell you what, let's stop there, because this isn't that kind of book. But you see where this is headed, right?

Okay, before things get out of hand, let's take the same exact scene, but now:

2. Add that the boy's grandmother is in the next room, slowly and loudly dying from emphysema after a lifetime of smoking cigarettes.

I don't know why, it's your story! But can you see or feel how the scene is different now?

All right, same two characters, same topic for the scene, but now:

3. They are in the back of a speeding taxi cab, in the middle of the night, in New York City, during a terrible rainstorm.

How does that change what you hear them saying and how they say it as you write the scene?

Okay, last one. Let's move the scene to:

4. A suspension bridge out in the middle of the country, on a lovely spring day, with no one around, a river roaring beneath them two hundred feet down...and they are sitting on the edge of that bridge with nothing to hold on to if they fall.

Why? Again, I don't know, but it changes the dialogue, doesn't it? Even if you keep the same words, the tone is very different.

Another way to think about setting is to avoid "typecasting" your dialogue or scene from time to time. What I mean by that is to choose a setting that is totally opposite from where readers might expect, and see if it carries a stronger punch.

For example, it's all well and good to deliver Henry the Fifth's "Once more unto the breach, dear friends"

monologue in a big, powerful Kenneth Branagh voice to a cast of thousands of cheering men while he's seated on a warhorse. But what happens if we put him hunkered around a campfire in the dark...and it's cold...and the men aren't sure they are up to the challenge of defeating the French...and it's just Henry talking to a mere handful of his faithful but dispirited captains?

It's the difference between:

**Once more unto the breach, dear friends!
ONCE MORE! Or close the wall up with our
English dead!**

Versus:

**Once more unto the breach—*dear friends*. *Once.*
More. Or . . . close the wall up with our English
dead.**

I'm not suggesting you should change things for change's sake, but do take the time to investigate other options for scenes that need a little kick. Both of these *Henry V* options are legitimate, but one is expected. The other is a surprise, and will hook a reader differently.

Note that we changed more than the setting in this example; we also changed the relationship Henry has to the men present. Well, guess what: relationships change a lot more often than you might realize, and that also impacts your dialogue! Here's how.

Understand the French Scene

Every time a character enters or exits a scene, a new scene has begun.

You needn't add an extra empty line of white space every time someone enters or exits; I just mean that every time someone enters or exits, *relationships change*, and therefore, so does the dialogue. In theatre, we call this a French scene.

Let's do another exercise:

Two teenage girls are in one of the girls' bedrooms on a Sunday afternoon. They are gossiping about Hunk Musclechin, the very cute all-star quarterback at their school.

WAIT!

Before you do anything else, can you already hear how this conversation sounds? (There's your Voice again!)

We'll call this "Scene One."

Now, Dad enters the room and asks, "Did you finish your homework?"

Scene Two has just begun, because a new character has come into the scene. When Dad leaves, Scene Two will be over and Scene Three will begin, because a character (it doesn't matter that it's Dad) has left the scene. If the daughter or friend left to go grab a snack, it would still change to "Scene Three."

Again, you don't need to delineate all these entrances and exits as separate scenes in your novel (though noting each French scene in a printout of the manuscript might yield some interesting patterns you can exploit later). The purpose in identifying a French scene is to take note of how the relationships instantly change when someone enters or exits.

You heard the two girls talking, right? Do you also hear the shift in their voices once Dad enters? Whether in big ways or small, word choice changes; tone changes; expressions change.

And can you hear how those things shift *back* once Dad is gone?

Here's one more exercise:

Place your protagonist in a room. Fill the room with his peers, whatever is appropriate to your storyworld. How does he speak? Now the Queen of England enters. How does his language, tempo, and word choice change?

The Queen leaves, and so do your protagonist's peers. He's alone in the room with just his best friend; what changes in his tone, attitude, cadence, or word choice?

Now enter his kindly grandmother; how do things change?

But then, in comes his domineering mother. Now how does the tension in the room change? How do your protagonist and his best friend and Granny all alter their speaking patterns?

Know “The Moment Before”

Where the character is coming from before he enters into a scene should influence his dialogue. Is this late on a Monday night? Early Saturday morning? Mid-day Sunday? What just happened right before his scene begins?

Let’s go back to the two girls talking about the attractive football player. We’ve established that their dialogue changes when Dad enters and exits the scene, so let’s add one more element. Imagine again the scene for a moment, “listening” to how the dialogue sounds in your head.

When Dad enters, imagine he’s just gotten a promotion at work. How do his lines sound?

Now imagine his team just lost the ball game. How do his lines come out now?

Or pretend he’s coming home from having lost his job, or after getting a poor diagnosis from the doctor, or that his partner surprised him with his favorite dinner. All these things happen “off stage” so to speak, but they impact how he interacts with the two girls. His goal is still to find out if his daughter did her homework, but how he approaches that goal is different.

You don’t need to tell us what happened in the Moment Before, necessarily, but as the author, you do need to know it because it will impact everything the character says and how he says it.

As always, make this choice deliberately.

Q&A

Q: What if my story is set on a spaceship or some other non-Earthly place? Why would setting a scene in the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon* be any different than setting it in a storage bay, for example?

A: It would be different based on how the characters behave in those environments. How they behave is something you, Creator God of the story, establish as quickly as possible. Using the *Falcon* example, recall that Luke, Ben, Chewie, Han, and the Droids are all in a large room in the ship as it races to Alderaan. All the characters can fit in the cockpit, but instead they lounge about, trading barbs about the Force versus a good blaster. (Luke's impromptu training with the drone obviously needs more room than a cockpit, but let's disregard that for the example.)

If we put the characters in the cockpit, there's a narrower field of view. Things are cramped. There's likely to be more focus on what's outside the windows than what's being said. So instead, we put them in this open space, essentially just hanging out. Chewie and R2 are playing a game, for crying out loud—this is not a terribly tense scene.

Why? One, we're taking a breather from the action to get re-oriented. Two, we're learning about the Force, about Han, and about Wookiees! Three, in just a moment or two, the team is going to find out what's happened to Alderaan—the slower pace here is a deliberate choice to build suspense, and doing so is more effective in a casual, relaxed setting that would not exist in the cockpit.

All right, maybe that wasn't a deliberate choice by George Lucas, I don't know. But the point is the same: people, and characters, have times and places for certain conversations. And we all know that not all conversations happen in the best place or time. And changing up those settings—whether it's a spaceship or riding on the back of a dragon or deep in a tunnel on Mars—will definitely change how your dialogue “sounds.”

Q: Do you mean I can't just have walk-ons who do and say what walk-ons normally would? Doesn't this add flavor or texture to the scenes?

A: Sure, you can, and it does. But be aware how such additions impact non-dialogue aspects of the story, such as pacing. For example, let's go back to our restaurant scenario, where two people are having a heated custody discussion:

“He's my son, too!” Frank said. “Either you give me partial custody, or—”

“Can I get you some more coffee?” the waitress interrupted, appearing by the table with a smile and a fresh pot of joe.

Frank glared up at her and barked, “No!” This made the waitress, a girl of maybe nineteen, look pouty and stomp away.

“And you wonder why I don't want to give you partial custody,” Judy said.

“I'm taking you to court,” Frank said.

The server's appearance and dialogue directly impact the scene. Better still, Frank is now at a disadvantage, and will have to fight harder to make his case.

Now compare it to this version:

“He’s my son, too!” Frank said. “Either you give me partial custody, or—”

“Can I get you some more coffee?” the waitress interrupted, appearing by the table with a smile and a fresh pot of joe.

Frank and Judy shook their heads.

“Or I’ll take you to court,” Frank went on.

In this example, the server’s appearance doesn’t mean anything. She adds nothing to the scene, apart from establishing the setting is in a diner . . . which should have been handled at the beginning of the scene anyway, not in the middle.

In the Civil War film *Glory*, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the North’s first all-black regiment, has been beset by constant racism by their own Union soldier brothers-in-arms. That is, right up until the moment before the final battle of the film when a white Union soldier shouts, “Give ’em hell, Fifty-four!”

It’s a goosebump-raising moment. This guy has one line; four words; six syllables. Yet it tells us (and the regiment, for that matter) how things have changed since the story started. That one, nameless character impacts the entire story *because* he is one, nameless character.

It might have worked just fine if one of the other principal characters said it . . . but it would have lacked the punch delivered here. His words, in the context of the story, matter deeply.

Q: So should I just delete every character whose dialogue doesn't further the plot?

A: You should delete such characters' *dialogue*, in my opinion, not necessarily the *character* himself. If you need a cabbie and his cab to get the character from 101st to 40th, keep the cabbie and keep the cab. Just take out the line, "Where ya headed, sweetie?" unless that line, that spoken line, somehow impacts the character and/or plot.

Or, maybe the cabbie is there to serve as comic relief during a desperate scene. In that case, keep him. All I ask is that such a choice was deliberate on your part.

Q: How do I know I'm using the right setting for a scene?

A: If the scene seems to be working for you, an editor, an agent, and readers, it's the right setting.

Okay, that was cheeky, I apologize. There's no easy answer because every single scene ever written is different, and every single scene ever written could theoretically be set somewhere else.

Ask yourself these questions:

Is the setting having an emotional or at least dramatic impact?

Is this a logical place for the scene to occur under the given circumstances of the novel?

Does the place I've chosen have any thematic resonance?

If all else fails, rewrite the scene in a different location and see what happens. (This is not a bad exercise, regardless of whether you keep the results or not.)

I do urge caution in defying standard genre expectations; mysteries, thrillers, romances, fantasy, science fiction, and everything in between tend to have readers with certain criteria in their minds, whether they know it or not. For example, if your romance takes place on a sprawling ranch in the 1800s, the big climax (ahem!) between the two leads is maybe best suited to an open prairie under a lovely Texas sky, rather than in a stuffy old schoolhouse—unless the stuffy old schoolhouse has some sort of thematic meaning.

DIVE INTO THE CHARACTER

Use Your Physical Memory

There's a reason every action movie consists of lines like, "Go! Run! Get down! Move! Get to the choppa!" It's because there's a physiological response happening in our bodies when we are in a fight-or-flight situation. Our resources aren't devoted to thinking how to speak.

(By the way, that's the official spelling of "choppa," according to schwarzenegger.com. You're welcome.)

It's why when two dudebro guys are squaring off outside a bar puffing out their chests and getting ready to fight, their language not only gets uglier, but also shorter and clipped. Their bodies can't help it. They use shorter words with fewer syllables, not to mention a whole lot of nonsensical grunting. "What's up! You wanna go? What's up! Come on! Come at me! What's up! Huh? You wanna go? What's up!" This makes no sense whatsoever, but it's all the body is capable of in the moment.

What physical condition is your character in when he speaks? Has he been shot? Is she sick? Is he terrified? Did she break her leg during her daring escape? All of these things impact what, how, and if your character would be speaking.

Recall moments in your own life that match the feeling you want to capture in a character. What does it feel like to run full-speed for five minutes and then try to talk? What kinds of words or sounds fly out of your mouth when you

are startled? Angry? Sad? Take these “physical memories” and endow them into characters.

The physical circumstances don’t have to match—perhaps your heroine never gets startled, for instance. What we’re after here is determining how a scene should sound, and then comparing that overall tone to something you remember from your own life.

I’ve never had to swing on a vine in the jungle to escape irate natives who I’ve offended. (Thank goodness.) But I *have* had to swing on a rope in a mud obstacle course; I know what the rope feels like, how my body felt mid-flight . . . and the word I said when I realized I was not going to clear the obstacle. (You can guess which word.) But armed with the physical memory of that swing, I could now write a much more energetic scene about a guy swinging on a vine.

Injuries, illness, and emotional state all impact word choice, rhythm, cadence, and so on. Have you ever been so angry that what you were saying made no sense?

Or so shocked you couldn’t talk at all?

Have you ever cried so hard you didn’t make a sound?

Be aware of what’s happening to your character’s body as a result of his physical or emotional state. Let those states of mind and body impact what—if anything—he says on the page.

Watch Your Blocking

Words, of course, are not the only way we communicate. We also use physical actions and facial expressions, and so do our characters. We'll call these non-verbal actions and expressions "blocking." In theatre, blocking refers to the physical movement of each actor. When they sit, stand, enter, exit, and so on. For our purposes, blocking will refer to any physical action or expression a character makes in the narrative: walking, sword fighting, raising eyebrows, rolling eyes, wincing, shrugging . . . anything other than the actual words the characters say.

One of the simplest things you can do to improve your dialogue is to avoid doubling up on words and blocking. A quick way to remember this is to remember never to write the following:

"I don't know," he shrugged.

He can say "I don't know," or he can shrug; there is no reason to do both. Likewise, if a character pinches the bridge of his nose, he needn't also say, "I'm so stressed out right now." The words and action both mean the same thing.

Let's take a look at three lines of dialogue between two characters:

**"I told Richard what you said about him,"
Jenny said.**

**Susan shot up from the couch, her mouth
falling open. "You did *what?*" she screeched.**

“You heard me,” Jenny said, smiling wickedly.

First of all, notice that Jenny is advancing an agenda. Haha! Snuck that one in!

Now, nothing is wrong with this exchange, although the adverb “wickedly” is a bit overwrought. But doesn’t Susan’s leap up from the couch—her blocking—pretty much indicate what she’s thinking? The exchange works just as well if you eliminate Susan’s line of dialogue:

**“I told Richard what you said about him,”
Jenny said.**

**Susan shot up from the couch, her mouth
falling open.**

“You heard me,” Jenny said, smiling wickedly.

On the other hand, you can also consider removing some blocking to keep the dialogue moving:

**“I told Richard what you said about him,”
Jenny said.**

“You did *what*?”

“You heard me,” Jenny said, smiling wickedly.

Does your blocking reveal anything about the character, plot, or theme? Or, is it just “moving people around the room?” There’s an old theatre adage that says the two hardest things to do on stage are to move, and to stand still. Whether you replace dialogue with blocking, or vice versa, remember there’s never any need to have both dialogue and blocking at the same time

Determine Wins and Losses

In general terms, every line of dialogue is a win or a loss.

And the protagonist is most often *losing*.

Once again, Shakespeare proves to be a great example of this. Consider the dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth before they kill King Duncan in Act One, Scene 7. We might say Macbeth's Want or Goal is to stop his wife's plotting, while her Want is to convince him that regicide will benefit them both.

Here is the scene, edited for length, reproduced from shakespeare.MIT.edu.

MACBETH

We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

LADY MACBETH

Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire?

MACBETH

Prithee, peace:
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

LADY MACBETH

What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man.
I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.

MACBETH

If we should fail?

LADY MACBETH

We fail!
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.

MACBETH

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

Both characters have clearly visible goals, which are in direct conflict. Hey, that sounds a lot like plot! (You may recall our discussion earlier about Macbeth not leaving the scene or ordering his wife to stop plotting because secretly, he wants to go through with the assassination. That is one

possible choice. In this example, we'll assume Macbeth is truly trying to win his point.)

Macbeth points out that the king has given him a high honor recently, and they should enjoy it, not repay the king by killing him. Lady M counters by calling him a coward. Ergo, Macbeth's previous line is a Loss—he was unable to sway his wife's decision.

Macbeth parries back, indicating Lady's M's line was a Win—he's had to change tactics. Macbeth claims he's a manly man, and anyone who would kill his king is not manly at all. Lady M replies by not only attacking his masculinity, but then ups the stakes by stating that if she had promised to kill her own child, she'd follow through because she loves him. That makes Macbeth's previous line a Loss.

Macbeth tries one last time to change her mind by questioning their fate if their murderous plans fail. Ergo, Lady M's previous line was a Win—he's against the ropes beneath her punishing verbal attacks.

The scene goes on until Macbeth agrees to go through with the murder. Game, set, and match for Lady Macbeth! The titular protagonist suffers a defeat in this scene, because he is unable to conquer the obstacle in front of him. And the plot moves forward.

So every line spoken by any character is either a Win—the character gets what she wants; or it is a Loss—the character does not get what she wants. Dialogue of any kind is a verbal sword fight, with parries, thrusts, advances, and retreats, all calibrated toward winning (obtaining a

goal). Even seemingly thoughtless grunts like “Huh?” or “What?” are chosen by the character (or author) for a reason.

If Macbeth’s line is a loss, then he’ll switch tactics on the next line. He’ll keep this up until he either capitulates or succeeds in obtaining his Want. In the case of I:7, Lady Macbeth is the obvious victor. But it is the collision of their two different wants that builds tension and raises the stakes.

As you can see in I:7, your protagonist does not have to win! Indeed, most protagonists win very few encounters until the final climax. Even then, they needn’t win; it is the struggle for the goal that keeps readers turning the pages.

Your dialogue should do the same. Your character has a goal, stated or implied, and there are obstacles in his way. Protagonists might Win here and there, but overall, they tend to Lose, right up until the final conflict. You can even go through your manuscript and mark the wins and losses in your dialogue. If there isn’t an exchange of these Wins and Losses, chances are your dialogue is not doing the work dialogue is meant to do: Move the story forward.

Use Your Emotional Memory

In theatre we use a term called “emotional memory” to describe how we endow a character or a scene with emotions we have ourselves felt and experienced. We do this to give the most authentic performance we can.

Think about it this way: We don’t ask every actor who has ever played Hamlet to have a father who was killed by an uncle. If we did that, only about two actors could ever have played that role. So when the actor is preparing he does not say, “How did I feel when my uncle killed my dad?” Instead he asks, “How does Hamlet feel in this moment? He’s angry—or jealous, or vengeful, or whatever. When is a time in my life I felt that same way?”

That’s emotional memory. You do the same thing instinctively as a writer already; what I want you to do now is flex that muscle deliberately.

Imagine you are writing a scene about a first kiss. For the purposes of your story, this first kiss has to be mind-blowing. Absolutely breathtaking. So you dutifully do your writerly homework, and reminisce about your own first kiss...

And maybe it sorta sucked. Hmm. That’s not what you want to capture with this scene.

Emotional memory isn’t about a point-by-point comparison; your first kiss vs. your protagonist’s first kiss. It’s about remembering a feeling, sensation, or emotion that you want to endow into the scene.

So in this example, if your first kiss doesn't bring up the fireworks you want, what about if you write about your first concert? Or a *favorite* concert or live event you went to?

Ah, see, now we've got anticipation, excitement, joy, unfettered thrill—at least, I hope so. Write the first-kiss scene while recalling how that first concert felt, then endow those sensations into the scene.

It will be an unforgettable kiss.

Exercises

1. Print out several pages of your manuscript (or the whole thing), and mark each Win and Loss with a pencil. It's not a huge deal if you can't do it for each and every single line of dialogue, but if you've got a page or more where you can't find any, it's time to rethink the scene.

2. Take a scene that you're unsure of or that needs work. Rewrite it set in one of these places, and/or come up with some of your own. Don't worry about the internal logic of the story for this ("There are no golf courses in my dystopian YA!"). An odd setting is part of the point. Just freewrite and see what you discover.

- A) A golf course at night during a thunderstorm.
- B) An outpost on Europa, looking out at Jupiter.
- C) A prison cell.
- D) The food court of a mall.
- E) On a rooftop watching fireworks in the distance.
- F) Front row of a house of worship, during a service.
- G) Trapped: ski lift, elevator, broom closet, whatever.

MAKING EVERYONE DIFFERENT

To Said or Not to Said

“Said” is what’s known as a dialogue attribution. That’s a lot to say, so I just call them dialogue tags, or simply “tags.” A tag is any word like *said*, or *screamed*, or *whispered*—anything designed to identify who is speaking and/or how a line is supposed to be understood by the reader.

Now, to answer the question that made you buy this book:

How often should you use “he said/she said”?

The answer is:

There is no rule.

I personally recommend defaulting to “said” about 75% of the time. Sometimes, you just have to cough, breathe, sigh, shout, scream, mutter, mumble, or shriek a line. But pick those deviations from *said* deliberately.

Realize that every time you use an alternative to “said,” the reader pauses just a bit. If that’s what you’re after, great. If it’s not, be careful.

Another argument about this point goes something like this: Don’t use “said” at all, just end the line of dialogue and use a bit of physical action or blocking to identify the speaking character.

It’s the difference between:

“We have to do something about this,” Bill said, frowning.

and

Bill frowned. “We have to do something about this.”

Both are fine, and I understand the suggestion to rephrase dialogue without that old “said” tag hanging around. So use your own judgement.

But a word of caution: I once encountered a manuscript where the word “said” simply and utterly did not exist, and it really threw me for a loop. I never did get accustomed to it not being there. In that particular case, the word’s absence was more distracting than its inclusion would have been.

So in all things, moderation.

Be Logical With Tags

Double and triple check your tags for logic. For example:

“Get down!” he hissed.

GeT DowN can’t be hissed. The sibilance doesn’t match.

You might get away with:

“Sit!” he hissed.

Because the onomatopoeia is in the same ballpark. This doesn’t really work either:

“Your attitude has been extremely poor these past few weeks, and I have had it up to here with you!” Mom barked.

Mom must be really on the scent of something important to “bark” so many syllables! The logic of the line and the tag don’t match.

On the other hand:

“Go!” Mom barked.

That at least *sounds* like a bark. Attributions like *bark*, *nag*, *snarl*, and so on are not wrong, they are part of our toolkit. Just ensure the attribution matches the dialogue it’s attached to.

Craft Narrative That Supports the Dialogue

Remember: blocking is any physical action a character takes.

We've already talked about how and why you should not double up on blocking and dialogue, but can narrative blocking enhance dialogue?

Absolutely. Let's take a look:

“Go to your room!” Dad stormed, slamming the door shut.

Nothing wrong with that, it's perfectly legit. The tag “stormed” is a bit overwrought, but appropriate to the blocking of slamming the door shut.

But what about this, instead?

“Go to your room!” Dad kicked the door shut, his work boot leaving a hole the size of my face in the flimsy wood.

Ah-ha. With one line of narrative blocking, we can guess—and probably be right if the author is doing his job—many things about the setting and about Dad.

1. Dad doesn't merely “slam” or “shut” the door, he kicks it. Kicking is a decidedly more violent action.
2. Dad is not wearing patent leather wingtips, nor high-

end running shoes, nor Birkenstock sandals. He's wearing work boots. There may be many reasons for that, but for now, this detail gives readers a certain impression of what kind of employment he might have (or be looking for).

3. A hole the size of what? Any hole would be bad enough; this is a hole the size of my face. This detail further implicates Dad as a man capable of violence.

4. Is the door made of oak? No. It's "flimsy wood." Chances are good we're not in a palatial spread in Beverly Hills.

Given all the clues in just this one piece of narrative blocking, do you already have a picture in mind of not only who Dad is, but where he and the narrator might live?

Having said all that, there's also nothing wrong with being economical and simply writing:

"Go to your room!"

We all know that voice, we've all heard it before. No tags are necessary unless Mom and Dad are in the room, and both are actively engaged (speaking) in the scene. If Mom's sitting quietly on the sofa, or it's just Dad and his kid, we can assume Dad said it, and how he said it.

In fiction, you can give action to your dialogue from time to time to show rather than tell how the line should be "delivered" or "heard" by the reader.

"I really can't take this anymore." Mom ground the heels of her palms into her eyes.

is different from:

“I really can’t take this anymore,” Mom sobbed.

Both are perfectly acceptable, and I’m not suggesting the first one is necessarily great writing; but it is action, and it *shows* us how Mom feels rather than *tells* us. We certainly don’t need to write it this way:

“I really can’t take this anymore,” Mom sobbed, and ground the heels of her palms into her eyes.

Another option is to let your word choice and blocking dictate a narrow range of emotional possibilities. There are only so many ways a person would likely say “I really can’t take this anymore.” The context of your scene should have already laid the groundwork for how the line is likely to sound:

Mom entered the room, threw her purse to the floor, kicked it into a corner, and gripped her hair with both hands. “I really can’t take this anymore!”

or

Mom entered the room, let her purse slide off her slumped shoulder to the floor, and collapsed into a chair. “I really can’t take this anymore.”

Both function perfectly well without adding “Mom said angrily” or “Mom mumbled.” Also note that the first example uses an exclamation mark, and the second doesn’t. That’s because punctuation is helping to do the work of any extraneous tags. Mom’s blocking has already done the heavy lifting.

Each Character Has Their Own Tic

Watch your language! Everyone has verbal tics which define their speech pattern.

I define “tics” as those strange little quirks of language and speech individuals have that can be used in fiction to help identify and reveal character. Word choice and cadence of speech varies widely from person to person. Cadence is the modulation or inflection of our voices, and the beat, or rate, or rhythm of our words. Would this character use short, abrupt words and sentences? How about long-winded, multisyllabic diatribes? It all depends. Each variant suggests something different about the character. Background, upbringing, education . . . these all impact how we speak.

It’s actually fairly simple to differentiate characters by making intentional choices about these qualities. For example, I have a friend who says “Yeahyeahyeah” when he’s heard enough of someone else’s prattle. Another friend used to end every declarative sentence with “I mean . . .” I find myself using the word “demonstrable” at every opportunity. In a novel, I can use tics like these to make one character stand out from the others.

What words does your character emphasize? De-emphasize? Do they trail off? Does he end declarative statements with affirmations, like, “It was a great movie, wasn’t it?” What’s appropriate to their age? State of mind? Physical or mental problems?

How a character speaks shows the reader a lot about that

character, and care should be taken to ensure you're not misleading the reader (unless of course, you're misleading them on purpose).

Perhaps the most obvious way to differentiate characters is in their word choice. Is the character prone to multisyllabic words like “multisyllabic?”

Or does he just kinda talk real regular?

Neither is wrong, but both reveal character. Readers will be inclined to associate big words with intelligence or education, and shorter words with—well, less than that. However, your evil mastermind might be exceedingly sharp but conceal it with small words, while your total idiot might try to mask his imbecilic nature with impressive but improperly used words. (Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* is a classic example.)

Ask yourself: Would this character say the skyscraper was big, or colossal? The words are practically synonymous, but what they say about the character is different.

Listen to how people speak. By listening, I mean really parse and contextualize people's speech. Most young people don't use the word “angry,” for instance. Most of them—actually, many of us all—still fall back on the word “mad” or even “pissed.” Neither is terribly good English, but then, American speech isn't proper either.

On the other hand, a half-orc cleric in a fantasy novel probably should not use “pissed” when he's really angry. (There are always exceptions, of course!)

(Furthermore, be aware that many words have different meanings in the United States than they do in other nations, “pissed” being one of them.)

Also note: a character who does speak in proper grammar has, herself, a different voice than most other people—that is, provided not everyone in your story also speaks that way.

We all have favorite words and phrases we’ve picked up; so too might your characters. It could be a catchphrase, like “We’re gonna have to roll sixes!” or else a word that seems to keep cropping up.

Again, these choices should be deliberate. (You’ve seen that word like 10 times now, I hope a pattern is emerging!) One of my favorite “secrets” about my novel *Zero* is about exactly this sort of intentionality.

Zero follows the exploits of a young visual artist, Amanda, and her boyfriend Mike, who is a musician. You know how when we are trying to get someone’s attention or make a specific point, we say words like, “Look!” or “Listen!” before the declaration? As in, “Listen, I did my homework like you asked!”

In *Zero*, Amanda will only use the word “Look,” and Mike will only use the word “Listen.”

Artist . . . musician . . .
Look . . . listen . . . ?

It’s a small thing. No one notices it unless I point it out.

But it's there, and your brain knows it.

If in the last chapter, Mike suddenly said, “Look, I need this job,” instead of “Listen, I need this job,” trust me, there'd be a teeny little glitch in your reading when you saw it. I've spent the whole novel training your brain to know that if someone says “Look,” but I don't give you an attribution like “Amanda said,” you'll still know it's her.

It's not a brilliant device, and I won't pretend it is. But it is a pattern that works its way quietly into the reader's subconscious. Little things like that can go a long way.

On that note, I don't encourage characters using their tics and favorites on every page, or even necessarily more than once every couple of chapters. Use these tics like salt—as a nice seasoning, but not so much that it'll ruin the flavor of everything around it.

Sentence length is another way to differentiate characters. In my novel *Mercy Rule*, which has multiple first-person narrators in each chapter, it became critical that I make each voice distinct.

For example, one character, Brady, uses no multisyllabic words. In revision, I changed words like “hesitate” to “wait.” Also, I did my best to rewrite his dialogue and narration with no commas, unless they were inside quotation marks, just to be grammatically correct. But his internal narrative rarely used commas, just lots of fragments. Finally, I deleted many uses of Brady's “I” to begin sentences; so he would use these sentence fragments like:

Went to school.

instead of:

I went to school.

You'll never question who is speaking when I have this character and no other use this dialogue tic.

Let's take one single sentence and show how different characters might say them in the novel. The sentence is:

I woke up, got ready for the day, and walked to school.

Here is how some different characters in *Mercy Rule* might say it:

BRADY

Got up. Got ready. Walked to school.

CADENCE

I woke up and got ready for the day and walked to school!

DANNY

I woke the hell up, got ready for the goddam day, and walked to goddam school.

Very different sentences, yet each conveys the same information. What kind of assumptions do you make about someone speaking the way these characters do? While I can't control how you perceive the characters, I'd be willing to bet whatever your assumptions are, you're

either right on or very close to the way I want you to perceive them.

Obviously, I've thrown grammar out the window at this point—or I've defenestrated it, if you wish. So remember that a character who does speak with proper grammar has a different voice of her own, provided not everyone in your story also speaks that way. And generally, they shouldn't!

Use Contractions Correctly

One thing I see a lot in beginning writers, regardless of age, is a lack of contractions. This mystifies me. Americans contract everything! Contractions can be proper:

isn't for *is not*

couldn't for *could not*

Or improper, but quite common:

gonna for *going to*

kinda for *kind of*

coulda for *could have*

Be careful when contracting two words ending in “of.” Kinda = kind of, where coulda = could have. “Could of” is neither a contraction nor grammatically correct, ever, in the printed word. This is an ear-to-page translation error. We hear the “v” sound, and mistake it for “of” instead of “have.”

Then there's dropping off the ends of words, usually a G, as in:

drinkin' for *drinking*

smokin' for *smoking*

I recommend these for use in dialogue exclusively as opposed to narration, unless your novel is first person and you don't think the narrative will get bogged down with so many contractions. Like dialect, this sort of thing can be fun, but in small doses.

And remember, these contractions depend on the scenario. They depend on the relationship the speaker has with the others who are present.

Most fictional Presidents of the United States would never say “coulda” while on TV or holding a cabinet meeting, but might slip it in when talking with his best friend out at Camp David. Still, switching up like that can be distracting, so I’d use caution when considering slipping in only the occasional contraction.

Now on the other hand, I am especially perplexed in some fiction by novice writers who make a standard-issue American teenager say:

I could have gone to the party, but I did not.

Wow. Really? Most of us, teen or not, would say aloud, “I coulda gone to the party, but I didn’t.” Or, more properly, “I could’ve gone to the party, but I didn’t.” If I as the author spell out those phrases that would normally be contractions, there better be a reason, like the character is trying to make a point.

“Mom,” I said patiently, “I could have gone to the party, but I did not.”

See how the narrator chooses not to contract, so that maybe Mom will actually hear his point? In fact, I would not use the modifier “patiently” here, because the deliberate choice to not use contractions illustrates his goal, tone, and state of mind without it:

“Mom, I could have gone to the party, but I did not.”

Can you hear his tone just as well without using the dialogue attribution?

By the way: eight or nine times out of ten, formal grammar and punctuation will serve the line just fine. It all depends on the scene, and who is speaking.

Be Careful With Accents

An accent is the way a person or people group are heard when they speak. A dialect is the grammatical ways in which they speak, and typically includes their accent.

Writing accents and dialects is a tricky endeavor. The temptation is to spell accented words phonetically. I've done it myself. I also sometimes wish I hadn't in some cases.

There's no real right or wrong answer to the question of spelling accents phonetically, but I do urge extreme caution.

Using them poorly can be offensive, or worse. On the other hand, like all of these suggestions, the right amount at the right time can have a big impact.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, author Dorothy Allison uses “an’t” for “ain’t,” or isn’t. That’s just about the only accented English to be found in the entire novel, but it gives just the right flavor of its time and place without being overwrought. She strikes an excellent balance between writing accents phonetically, and deliberate word choice and placement to achieve an authentic geographic voice.

“An’t they gonna look fine up there under the eaves?” says a character about potted plants. *An’t*, *gonna*, and *fine* all give this one line of dialogue a regional flavor and authenticity. Where I come from, most people would say, “Aren’t they going to look great up there under the eaves?” Same line, same meaning . . . different geography.

Another issue on accents is simply this: Who's to say someone *has* an accent? And can you tell regional differences? To me, born and raised in central Arizona, "Southern accents" all sound alike. That could be as near as Texas and as far as the Virginias. Folks from both areas would quickly correct my southwestern stupidity. Also (as I've learned from Texans), there isn't a "Texas accent" any more than there is a "Southern accent." There are regional variations throughout all states and regions. Furthermore, never mind what my ridiculous Phoenician accent must sound like to *them*.

If you're not personally familiar with a geographic accent, it's probable that you're basing the impulse to write phonetically on accents you've heard in movies and on television. That's risky, too, because who's to say the actors or director got it right?

Would someone from a specific geographic area agree that how you wrote the accent is in fact the way it sounds? Maybe it's enough to say *She had a delightful southern lilt* or *His voice had a rough, Irish sean-nós quality*, and let it go at that, using regional words, phrases, and word placement to do the job rather than phonetic spellings.

All of which is to say: discretion is the better part of writing accents. If you do choose to use phonetics to illustrate accent, try doing so sparingly. There's no need to beat readers over the head, as in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*:

"Ah sais nae mair." Whin ye feel like he did, ye dinnae want tae talk or be talked at.

It's a excellent novel, and perhaps a great primer on how to write phonetic Scots—but again, those accents are particular to certain geographical locations within Scotland. To an American, there may only be a singular “Scottish accent.” To Scots, there are numerous accents in their nation, just as Americans don't have one standardized “American accent.”

Sometimes, it's enough to draw attention to an accent or vocal tic, then let it go. I have a dear friend who has the world's most pronounced glottal stop. She would say *We're meeting by the fountain on the mountain* like this: “We're mee'in' by the foun'in on the mou'in.”

No one wants to read that tic throughout an entire novel. Pointing it out when we first meet such a character and then writing the words correctly thereafter is usually fine.

Very few of us pronounce the “T” sound in words like *button*, but we wouldn't render every utterance of it in a manuscript as *buh'in*.

Finally, such a pronounced tic or accent ought to impact the character, or even plot. For better or worse, it should be a useful tic (for you, the author) in terms of the storytelling.

You're Not From Around Here, Are You?

To the best of your ability, be aware of regional word choice. The most famous example, perhaps, is “pop” versus “soda.” An awareness of regional words is particularly tricky if you are writing about a region you haven't so much as visited.

Bear in mind that while transplants from one part of the country (or world) (or worlds?) sometimes adopt regional words of their new homes after a year or so, they might retain long-held words or phrases that will set them apart in your story. That's something else you can use to distinguish voice—the guy who always says “pop” instead of “soda” or even “Coke,” which in some parts of the country is the default name for any and all carbonated sodas.

Apart from moving to a new state for a year or two to study the local linguistics, the following Harvard Dialect Study website can be a real asset. It's a large but not comprehensive list of regional words and phrases. Don't stick to it slavishly—use it as a reference.

www4.uwm.edu/FLL/linguistics/dialect/maps.html

Q&A

Q: Can we use phonetic spelling for dialects or accents *at all*?

A: If you are personally well-versed and intimate with a particular accent or dialect, it might be okay to do . . . but I still recommend using it sparingly. Consider instead using word choice, sentence length, word length, or favorite words to indicate an accent.

For example, a woman using the contracted word *Darlin'* is going to conjure up a certain image; are you sure it's the image you want? And if so, are you painting with a broad brush?

On the other hand, if the image that word brings up is exactly what you're going for, then maybe that's okay—and it's also sufficient. You needn't then give this character a whole range of other contracted words to make sure that we understand she has an accent. *Darlin'* does all the work for us.

Some authors go in absolutely the other direction and spend whole novels in a dialect or accent. *Trainspotting* is a perfect example. I did read the whole book, but it took about an hour in chapter one to get used to the phonetically spelled Scottish dialect Welsh used.

Having said all that, these suggestions really only apply to novels taking place in modern America or Western countries. If you are writing a fantasy novel, then by all

means, play around a bit with tics, cadences, rhythms, favorite or invented words, and so on. Just don't go overboard. Remember: Clarity is god!

Exercises

1. Choose a scene from your manuscript, and take one character from it who you're not writing his or her dialogue phonetically, and re-write it with phonetics. Forced to see and read how Frank or Judy actually sound out loud, what did you discover about them? (Maybe nothing—that's an acceptable answer.)

Or does it turn out that in your head, you've heard Judy wrongly hitting a syllable on a word which drives Frank's Ivy League sensibilities crazy, thus contributing to their upcoming divorce?

Doing funky things with dialogue should have *purpose*.

2. Have a high school, college, or local theatre friend read your manuscript or scenes from your story out loud to you, or have them record it and send it to you. How's it sound? Are things landing just right? Try not to critique the performance itself; listen close for how the actor instinctively followed the “musical notes” (punctuation, etc.) in your prose. Ask her questions afterward to further clarify anything that didn't sound the way you'd wanted it to.

MANIPULATING DIALOGUE WITH REAL ESTATE

Your story has real estate, which is just another way to talk about the white space on a blank page that you will be placing words upon. You have as much room as you want; the question is, how do you best use it?

Everything from pacing to Voice to tension can be purposefully manipulated by how you use white space, punctuation, the orders of words, and more.

Play with Hard Returns and White Space

Changing the Voice of a story (whether in first-person or third-person) can sometimes be as simple as changing where things fall on the page. Let me show you the first page of my novel *Party*, as it appears in the published book.

I'm the girl nobody knows until she commits suicide. Then suddenly everyone had a class with her.

You know the one I mean.

You don't pick on her because you don't know she's there, not really. She sits behind you in chemistry, or across the room in Spanish. You've seen her naked in the locker room after physical education—a contradiction in terms if ever there was one—but you don't know what color her eyes are.

What her name is.

What grade she's in.

Now what if it looks like this instead? Please note that I haven't changed a single word:

I'm the girl nobody knows until she commits suicide. Then suddenly everyone had a class with her. You know the one I mean. You don't pick on her because you don't know she's there, not really. She sits behind you in chemistry, or across the room in Spanish. You've seen her naked in the locker room after physical education—a contradiction in terms if ever there was one—but you don't know what color her eyes are. What her name is. What grade she's in.

Does it sound different in your head? Let's try one more:

I'm that girl nobody knows until she commits suicide. Then suddenly? Everyone had a class with her!

You know the one I mean?

You don't know what color her eyes are, or what her name is, or what grade she's in.

Do you hear the tone change here? I've cut a big section out and changed some punctuation, but I have not added any words, and I changed only one word. I would argue this tone is a lot more angry, or bitchy, or frustrated—or possibly even silly. In any case, it's not nearly as sad or morose as the original. These are the kinds of things you can change intentionally when you play with white space. Do you need to use shorter paragraphs? How about longer? Play around and see what you come up with.

Use Punctuation Like Music

Punctuation is your best friend (or worst enemy) when it comes to dialogue. Punctuation is like reading notes in music, with each choice having a specific function and “sound” on the page.

I am not a grammarian, if you haven’t noticed. I do try my best to use standard, accepted grammar and formatting for my novels. But when it comes to dialogue, I think a lot of those rules can be set aside. To me, as someone who worked for two decades in theatre, punctuation has only one function in dialogue:

To indicate a length and type of pause.

The length of a pause, the inflection of a pause, is indicated by punctuation. And length and inflection can illustrate the emotional or mental state of the character speaking.

These are the “notes” we have available in our music of dialogue and prose. I am including different types of font in our punctuation discussion.

period	.
comma	,
em-dash	—
semicolon	;
colon	:
ellipsis	...
exclamation	!
question	?
parentheses	() [and brackets, etc.]

strike outs	font
bold	font
<i>italics</i>	font
CAPS	font

One of the first things I was taught to do in my Shakespeare training was to remove all the punctuation from the script early on. The reason for this is multifold. For one thing, any modern rendering is being punctuated by someone from the modern age, and so the punctuation can sometimes be arbitrary. And second, the punctuation they use—and the punctuation Shakespeare used in his day, what little there was—may not indicate how you actually want to say the line.

For example, in the New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth* (Washington Square Press, 1992), we find this line, spoken by Macbeth right after having killed the king:

What hands are here!
Ha, they pluck out mine eyes.

Whereas the MIT.edu full text collection of Shakespeare's plays renders the same line thusly:

What hands are here?
ha! they pluck out mine eyes.

And the *Applause First Folio of Shakespeare Comedies, Histories & Tragedies in Modern Type* (Folio Scripts, 2001) renders it like this:

What Hands are here?

hah: they pluck out mine Eyes.

None of these is right or wrong, but as the actor (or director), how would you want the words heard and understood? Let's try some other options and see how each one is just a bit different:

What hands are here...?

ha. they pluck out mine eyes.

What hands are here!

ha—they pluck out mine eyes.

What...hands are here?

ha, they pluck out mine...eyes!

(This one sounds like William Shatner.)

What hands are here?

ha! they pluck out mine eyes!

What hands are here?

ha; they pluck out mine eyes.

Every piece of punctuation is indicating a pause—it's just a matter of the type, length, etcetera. A semicolon isn't the same as an em dash, or as an ellipse, and so on. Here's a real life example from my novel *Sick*:

“That was Jack, Jack was out there, we gotta let him in.”

Here's the way the copyeditor wanted it written:

“That was Jack. Jack was out there. We gotta let him in.”

I read the first one in rush, because there are no periods. Grammatically, maybe, they should be periods. But on the page, I want the line to flow together and sound desperate.

I am not advocating filling your manuscript with an assortment of punctuation just for the sake of it. Periods and commas are always going to be your primary weapons, just like using “he said, she said” are most often your best dialogue tags.

We talked about how punctuation acts as musical notes of a sort. Word choice and the order of those words also impacts flow; it changes how a reader reads narrative and dialogue. Also consider our previous discussion about how often to use “said” or “says” when you look at these next two examples from my novel *Hellworld*:

“There’s got to be a way!” Charlie shouts.

Dr. Riley calmly swigs from his tequila bottle, and smacks his lips afterward with a sigh.

“If I thought that,” he says, “I wouldn’t be out here with a gun I’ve never fired once in my entire life.”

Another way to render this set of dialogue is like this:

“There’s got to be a way!” Charlie shouts.

Dr. Riley calmly swigs from his tequila bottle, and smacks his lips afterward with a sigh. “If I thought that, I wouldn’t be out here with a gun I’ve never fired once in my entire life.”

Either one is fine, but notice how in the first version, there’s

a forced pause on Dr. Riley's line. By putting in a hard return and including "he says" in the line, I'm physically forcing the reader to "hesitate" twice while reading Riley's dialogue.

That little hesitation, no matter how tiny, gives the line just that little bit more suspense, that little bit more of a wait before the bomb gets dropped.

Read it again. Can you hear it? The second example runs together; things keep right on going. That's great for a faster-paced scene, but this one needed some cooling off, some slow burn. So I opted for the first iteration.

Here's another example of punctuation changing inflection, and therefore, mood and tone, again from *Hellworld*.

"I don't see where we stand much chance," Dr. Riley says.

"So that's it," Charlie says. "That's all you've got."

Grammatically, Charlie's lines should end with question marks, right? But question marks sound "up" at the end. Periods sound "down." *Down* is how I want the delivery to sound in the reader's head. Imagine these words on a sheet of music. It's the difference between:

	it?		got?
	that's		you've
So		all	
	That's		

And:

So That's
 that's all
 it. you've
 got.

Can you hear it? Make those deliberate choices with your punctuation. It is the music of the words.

Choose Fonts and Typefaces Wisely

In addition to punctuation, you have a wide array of fonts and typefaces to put to work in your novel. Italics, bold type, underlines, and strikeouts are the primary fonts you might consider using for a variety of reasons.

Use italics for emphasis. Bold isn't used too frequently in published fiction, though it does pop up from time to time. Likewise, underlining is a thing of the past, and strikeouts have already had their brief heyday online.

There are plenty of examples of novels (including my own) where underlines and bold fonts, in addition to italics, are used in an attempt to produce one sort of emphasis or another. Both *Party* and *Zero* are good examples of how I used them. In my chapter *Survival Instinct* in the novel *Violent Ends*, for example, I rendered an abusive father character's dialogue in bold font exclusively, without any quotation marks. These were corrected by a copyeditor to be standard font and included quotation marks. I then re-corrected the lines back to bold when the editor, Shaun Hutchinson, agreed with me that the bolding was the right choice for the "voice" of the piece.

Still: stick with italics for emphasis rather than bold. (Do as I say, not as I do!) (Unless of course what you do is working, in which case, carry on.) It is important to show editors that you know which rules you are breaking and why. If you're not sure you can do so successfully, wait until your second novel to deviate from the norm.

If you are submitting to New York houses or agents, avoid

nonstandard typefaces such as Arial or Comic Sans and so on. Times New Roman is the accepted typeface to use for manuscripts. Courier New is a distant second. Default typefaces like Calibri are sans-serif fonts and harder to read for long periods. (My understanding is 12-point Courier remains the default for screenplays. Stage plays have no standardized font requirement, but stick to Courier or Times New Roman to be on the safe side.)

If you're going the indie route, then please do your due diligence on what makes a good typeface for e-readers and for print. I am not about to get into that discussion here. Do your homework.

(For readers of the print version of this book, I'm using Garamond 12.5-point typeface. But for formatting independently published books, there are other issues to consider, like spacing, kerning, letting . . . yeah. Do your research, Indies.)

Q&A

Q: Since most Americans use contractions, should I use spellings like *coulda*, *woulda*, and *shoulda* for most of my characters?

A: No. These spellings (and any others) are tools in your dialogue toolbox. You need to pick the right tool to get the job done. I would argue that most American characters should use the contractions *could've*, *would've*, and *should've*, yes. These are grammatically correct, and have “less voice” than those ending with “a.” Having one or two specific character use *coulda*, etc., is probably enough.

Q: You got awfully particular about things like commas versus periods. Isn't that a little overboard?

A: When you get your first round of line edits from a professional copyeditor, you'll be amazed at how specific you suddenly must become. So the answer is No, it's not a little overboard, at least not for a New York legacy publisher. They will question every single little detail, details you might not have even been aware were in your manuscript. Gird up, it's gonna be a long day of copyediting (no matter what).

If you're going indie, it might not matter so much, but I still maintain that punctuation should be a deliberate choice made during manuscript revision to best obtain the voice you want to capture and share in the pages.

Q: You talked about using logic with tags. What about tags that are physically impossible, such as: “It's so dusty!” Bob sneezed. Can or should I use those?

A: Some authors or editors would argue here that a person cannot literally sneeze and talk at the same time, ergo, writers should not use a dialogue attribution such as *snee~~zed~~*. I personally veer away from such usages, but it would not trip me up if I came across it in a manuscript.

Q: You said not to use unconventional typefaces for an entire manuscript. Can I use them sparingly, like for chapter headings, or other character's voices, or to show a handwritten journal entry, or to distinguish between narrators in a multiple-POV novel?

A: Do not use “fun” typefaces for chapter headings. It looks amateurish. Let professional designers do that job, *regardless* of whether you are submitting to agents or going indie. It's true that published books use many fonts and typefaces, but those are a designer's choice, not an author's.

Having written many multiple-POV novels, I understand the temptation to use different typefaces for different characters in a multi-POV book. I do not recommend it. Your writing alone should be enough to differentiate one character from another. Also, as above, typeface is a book designer's job. *Your* job is to deliver clarity above all else, not gimmicks.

For short (one page or less) journal entries or other “handwriting” that you want to show in your prose, or for text messages and so on that will be portrayed in print, stick with italics. That's the standard. Sell your novel first, then talk design specifics with your editor when the time comes.

IN CONCLUSION: THE BLACK BOX

There's not a thing wrong with spectacle, such as a Broadway production of *The Lion King*. We're paying to see a grand event, with lights and effects and costumes that should blow us away. However, if the cast can't stand on stage dressed in their street clothes and belt out the songs without accompaniment, be heard in the back row, and do it well . . . then the show just isn't going to be as good. The fundamentals must be there in order for the flashy effects to work.

In theatre, we use the term "black box" to refer to a rehearsal without props, costumes, or scenic elements. (It can also refer to a rehearsal or performance space that also lacks these things.) Doing a rehearsal black-box reveals a lot with what might be wrong with a show, cast, director, anything else. My cast should not *require* props, costumes, lights, and sound to do their best work.

This is true of writing as well. **If I cannot write a compelling story using only standard grammar and punctuation, without any of the bells and whistles covered in this book, then I should look at my storytelling skill set.**

If I absolutely require crazy fonts and funky phonetics in my dialogue or narrative, something in the story itself or my telling of it needs work. Only when that foundation is strong should I go messing about with punctuation, fonts, etc. Indeed, frequently in theatre, we do not rehearse with

props or costumes first; these get layered in later as the foundation takes shape.

If your story isn't working as a whole, consider "black boxing" it to look for structural weaknesses. Maybe you've relied too much on some of the ideas and tips in this book, and doing so has actually made the story worse instead of better. Much of what we talked about here is for revision, not for a first draft. Revision—like rehearsal—is where the story gets crafted into something entertaining and meaningful for the audience.

So, have I just upended everything I put in this book?

I hope not. My goal for you is to craft the best possible story you can, and stripping it down and starting over is part of crafting. I've done it many times, and most authors I know have had to do it once or twice at least on their way toward publication.

May you enjoy the trip as much as I do.

Keep writing!

GLOSSARY

accent - a vocal inflection or tone, and/or the stresses and unstresses used in the spoken language of regional people groups

black box - a stripped-down version of a theatrical performance; used here to mean “do not rely on font or punctuation gimmicks to sell your story”

cadence - rhythmic sequence of sounds in a spoken language

dialect - spoken language of a particular area with its own variations on grammar, word choice, and pronunciation

diction - the way words are used in spoken language



AFTERWORD

I've been teaching classes and seminars on dialogue in fiction since my first novel came out. It is far and away my favorite writing topic. I hope that enthusiasm came through in this book!

Here's one last bit of advice:

Don't let anyone tell you that you can't publish your book, *especially yourself*.

Whether you are trying to go indie or traditional, book publishing is a long and often lonely trip. Doubts plague everyone. *Everyone*. Some of us have supportive friends and family (like I do) and some do not (like some of my author friends).

If you're a writer who is scared of clicking that Publish button or hitting Send on that email to a big agent, don't worry: we all are. But you still have to do it.

We're all in this together. You can do it.

Take care,

~ Tom

3rd Edition Bonus Material:

**HOW TO WRITE
YOUR NOVEL
BY
WATCHING MOVIES FIRST**

ON SPOILERS AND MOVIE CHOICE

Folks, the statute of limitations for spoilers is far past with all of these movies. If you don't know by now who gets eaten in *Jaws* or who wins the 1984 All Valley Under 18 Karate Championship, then I'm sorry—grab your Netflix and Amazon Prime and get to watching.

You can (and should) watch each of these films before or while reading each movie's chapter. But I'm telling you right now, I'm not about to hold back on spoilers.

Plus, frankly, these are movies mostly from the 1980s. Twists and irony weren't exactly *de rigueur*. You can probably guess what happens at the end of most of them if you don't already know from sheer cultural awareness.

You have been advised!

WHY THESE MOVIES?

This is a book written by a Gen-X white male who grew up watching certain movies and not watching certain others.

My choice of films for this book reflects those tastes.

If you are a writer who doesn't fall into any of those three demographics above, despair not, and don't give up on me: the points I'm making and tips I'm offering from each film can still help you and your novel, whether you're writing historical romance, or gritty YA, or hard science fiction, or . . . so on and so on. It's all pertinent to every genre of fiction. Feel free to judge me and my taste in movies from my teen years, but give the advice a chance, okay?

And having said that, as with any advice on writing, take what you like and leave the rest.

Final note: Film information is gathered exclusively from IMBD.com. Quotes are taken from the final film version, not from a quotes site or published screenplay.

INTRODUCTION

This book catalogues eleven now-classic films from the '70s, '80s, and '90s that left enormous impressions on me as a kid; which influenced my own writing (nine hardcover novels with traditional publishers including imprints of Random House and Simon & Schuster); and which I believe contain specific gems that can give your own fiction a little boost.

As a writer, you probably know by now that writing screenplays and making movies are not at all the same skills (or talents) as writing novels. Notice that very few writers successfully publish and produce in both the long-form novel *and* the screenplay.

There are, however, storytelling basics that apply to virtually every story ever told (or at least ever told well), no matter the format. Over the past several years, as I taught college-level classes on writing dialogue, description, and publishing in general, I found myself frequently referring to movies to illustrate a point. But why reference movies in a class about writing books?

Films are simply more universal touchpoints than books. Statistically, more people in my writing classes will have seen a given film than will have read a certain book, so my comparisons are generally well understood. Plus, not everyone (*gasp!*) has read *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games* (or Shakespeare, it turns out).

On the other hand, most people in 21st Century Western Civilization know at least a little something about our modern cinema classics such as *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones* or *Superman*—pretty much anything scored by John Williams will do. It is useful in the writing classroom to have a common frame of reference and oftentimes films fit that bill better than novels.

In that spirit, here are eleven movies you need to see if you haven't, and to study more closely if you've seen them already. These films provide a wealth of surprising tips that can help you write a stronger novel.

STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN

Released June 4, 1982

Directed by Nicholas Meyer

writing credits:

Gene Roddenberry, television series, Star Trek

Harve Bennett, story

Jack B. Sowards, story & screenplay

Nicholas Meyer, screenplay (uncredited)

Samuel A. Peeples, story (uncredited)

TAKEAWAY

Use all five (or more) senses.

Create thematic mileage.

Craft patterns in the story.

Make deliberate choices.

SYNOPSIS

While on a simple mission with a ship full of Star Fleet trainees, Captain Kirk and the Enterprise crew are attacked by Khan, a man Kirk banished to a desolate planet fifteen years prior. A tactical cat-and-mouse game ensues as the captain struggles to pit his skill against Khan's thirst for vengeance, and costing Kirk more than he ever imagined.

BREAKDOWN

I'm starting with *Wrath of Khan* because, one, it might be my favorite movie discussed in this book, and two, there is so much wonderful storytelling to parse. If you only read this one chapter, you'll still come away with a plethora of tips for your own fiction writing toolkit.

You know who Kirk and Spock are. (If you have no idea who I'm talking about, honestly, just stop reading the book now. C'mon, man! Seriously. *Kirk and Spock*.) Knowing of these two seminal characters will be enough to get the gist of what studying this film has to offer.

+

I was not a *Star Trek* fan when I first saw *Khan*. I'm conversant in the world of *Trek*, but no Trekker. But *Khan* is probably one of my top three favorite movies of all time.

Of all the myriad *Trek* franchise options, from the original series to the rebooted films and however many TV series, why pull this one story out from the expansive (galactic?) world of *Star Trek* to hold up for special consideration?

First there are the many themes in *Khan*. One is the inexorable march of time and how human beings deal with the cold reality of death. Dealing with death is at the fore of this entire film. Kirk outright states as much to Lieutenant Saavik, a young Vulcan officer, noting that how people deal with death ought to be as important as how we deal with life. There are subtle hints of this theme woven throughout the script, right up until (and after) the tragic climax.

The writers use several tools to support this theme, both subtle and overt. Sensory engagement is one of these tools.

Sensory Engagement

Listen closely during one of the first scenes between Kirk and his trusted friend Dr. McCoy. McCoy has arrived to celebrate Kirk's birthday with a gift of Romulan ale, interrupting an obviously depressed Kirk, who sits alone in his apartment with only his beloved antiques for company. McCoy chides Kirk for giving up his post as a captain on a ship in favor of "flying a computer console" as an admiral. It took a few viewings, but I finally caught a sound cue barely audible in the background of Kirk's apartment:

A steadily, softly, ticking clock.

Over drinks, McCoy urges Kirk to return to being the captain of a ship: "Get back your command. Get it back before you become part of this collection [of antiques]. Before you really do grow old."

Tick...tick...tick...

It's the kind of touch that brings the scene added, wonderful depth. Look for this kind of additive to salt on your scenes if they need a little spice. You don't need much; remember, the clock is barely audible, but it's there. What sound, smell, or taste might add resonance to your scene? What can your hero taste while he proposes to the heroine that enhances the romance of the moment?

What can your protagonist hear during a wild firefight besides the sounds of bullets whizzing by to ramp up the tension? What scent is in the air when your main character is protecting her child from ice dragons?

The point is not to add these sensory touchpoints just for the sake of adding them. Adding sensory cues to your fiction should be a deliberately crafted choice that underscores or supports the plot, character, or theme of the novel.

Mirrors, Patterns, Echoes

In your fiction, look for what author Ansen Dibell calls mirrors, patterns, and echoes. (Dibell's book *Plot* is a great primer for aspiring authors still learning plot and structure.) Identifying or creating them in your long-form fiction can foster a sense of completion in the reader; a sense of unity that may go unnoticed on the surface but is deeply felt.

During Kirk's most dire moment in the film—well, second-most dire—he is asked by a former girlfriend how he is feeling. Kirk reminds her that Khan, a man he hasn't seen in fifteen years, wants him dead, and that Kirk himself just learned he is father to a son who may take a shot at him, too.

“How do I feel?” Kirk says, his voice as tired as his antiques back home in that empty apartment. “Old. . . . Worn out.” And he looks it. It's not often you see a legendary *Star Trek* captain looking worn, haggard, and beaten, but in that moment, Admiral James T. Kirk is just old Jim, about ready to throw in the towel.

In the last scene of the movie, Dr. McCoy asks him the same question, “How do you feel?” unaware it’s been asked of Kirk just hours before. By this time, Kirk has defeated Khan, saved his crew, and reconciled with his only son. Standing on the bridge of his beloved ship and looking out at a brand-new planet, with near-tears in his eyes at his renewed faith in himself and his friends, Kirk replies: “Young. I feel . . . young!”

It’s a simple but effective mirror to his earlier depressed state in his apartment and with his ex-. It illustrates a great character arc for the protagonist, and underscores another important aspect of fiction: decide where you want the character to end up, and start as far away from there as possible.

Kirk starts off alone and morose, feeling the weight of what amounts to retirement; but by movie’s end, he’s surrounded by friends and family and doing the thing that he was born to do: command a starship. (Two movies later, Kirk is “punished” by Star Fleet by being demoted from Admiral to Captain and put back in charge of the *Enterprise*. Shatner’s expression during the sentencing in that scene is subtle, but glorious.)

The screenwriters also call on classic literature to echo themes and arcs in the movie. At the beginning of the film, Spock gives Kirk a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* for his birthday. (*His birthday!* Dammit, Jim! Are you seeing these themes mirrored all over the place? Birth, death...). Kirk quotes from the novel right away: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

By the end of *Wrath of Khan*, it is indeed the best and worst of times for the admiral when you consider the people he has both gained and lost. The film's plot revolves around Khan's reckless, single-minded pursuit of Kirk, with plenty of action and possibly the best interstellar ship battle ever filmed . . . but despite the action, it's the themes that echo perfectly even all these decades later. There are a dozen more, which you'll catch as you study the movie. Note, for instance, Kirk's first line to Spock following a particularly destructive Kobayashi Maru training event: "Aren't you dead?" Brilliant, once you know Spock's fate.

Make Deliberate Choices

However, the most important word I want you to walk away with is this:

Deliberate.

The writers deliberately set the film on Kirk's birthday, a day when many of us older folk don't like to be reminded of just how old we are and might wonder what's next for us—or what's left. They deliberately set his character arc against the words of Dickens, then gave Khan his own literary echo with *Moby Dick*. They deliberately put that ticking clock in his lonely apartment. A young cadet is killed during Khan's first attack on the *Enterprise*; the cadet, dying, grabs Kirk's jacket, leaving a bloody handprint. That bloody mark stays on Kirk's coat for most of the film, placing the blame for this kid's death squarely on Kirk's conscience which he must carry with him.

That, too, was deliberate (and reinforces the use of more than one sensory input to make an impact).

I understand what it's like to get carried away with characters who run all over the place in a first draft of a book. How many times have I heard a writer say, "The character just made me go in another direction!"

It happens, and it's fine. It can be exactly what the novel needs.

The time comes, however, when you need to put on your big-kid author pants and craft the story. Make deliberate choices for the characters, setting, and plot that will enhance the themes and story as a whole.

I'm still learning how to do it myself. *The Wrath of Khan* is one film I return to again and again for inspiration.

TOMBSTONE

Released December 25, 1993

Directed by George P. Cosmatos

and Kevin Jarre (uncredited)

writing credits:

Kevin Jarre, writer

TAKEAWAY

Sometimes it's better to reveal things about your protagonist or antagonist by how others treat them and talk about them.

SYNOPSIS

In a bid to escape his past, notorious lawman Wyatt Earp moves his family to Tombstone, Arizona, but a murderous band of outlaws forces him back into wearing a badge.

BREAKDOWN

Many writers and filmmakers have given their own re-tellings of the gunfight at the OK Corral, which took place on October 26, 1881, in my home state of Arizona. I've even been to the site itself. Tombstone is now a tourist attraction, and very much worth visiting (but go in the fall or winter!).

My personal favorite of these legendary cinematic recreations is *Tombstone*, starring Kurt Russell as Wyatt

Earp, and an utterly magnetic Val Kilmer as Doc Holliday, Wyatt's good friend.

For our purposes as writers, it's all right if you don't know much about the shootout at the OK Corral. If you don't know much about Wyatt Earp the historical figure, even better. If you've never seen *Tombstone* . . . well, do watch it, but read this first because this tip actually works better when you don't know all the details beforehand.

Early in the film, we meet Johnny Tyler, a mean-spirited little troll of a man who makes his living as a card dealer at a run-down saloon in Tombstone. He's a jerk, but the owner can't get rid of him. That changes when Wyatt Earp comes in, smacks him around, makes him look like an utter fool, and throws Johnny out of the saloon by his ear. The saloon owner happily gives Wyatt Johnny's old job.

(Importantly, Wyatt never introduced himself to poor old Johnny.)

A few minutes later, Wyatt meets his two brothers out in the dusty street, pleased with the new card game he's just inherited. Suddenly Johnny Tyler comes running up behind Wyatt, a double-barreled shotgun in his hand and murder in his eye. Nobody makes a fool of Johnny Tyler! Johnny's murderous intent is interrupted by Holliday, friends with Wyatt and his brothers, while loitering outside a haberdashery. Doc exclaims, "Why, Johnny Tyler! You madcap. Where you going with that shotgun?"

Doc then says hello to his good friend: "Wyatt, I am rolling!"

Johnny's face freezes. "Wyatt *Earp*?"

No one answers him as the four men continue on with their conversation, leaving Johnny Tyler to stand in the background, still holding his shotgun. Eventually, Doc turns to him and says, "Oh, Johnny. I apologize, I forgot you were there. You may go now."

Johnny turns to leave, but Wyatt's got one more thing for him:

"Just leave that shotgun."

Johnny stops, and, taking the weapon by the barrel, tries to hand it over.

"Leave it," says the former gunfighter.

Johnny Tyler sets the gun down in the dirt, dips his head, and in vaguely quaking voice says:

"*Thank you.*"

What? Thank you for making me give up my gun? Thank you for making me look bad and costing me my job? Johnny, played by Billy Bob Thornton, is utterly sincere when he says it.

Yes, thank you for all that, Mr. Earp, because I get to live another day!

Not Wyatt Earp, not his brothers, and not Doc have drawn weapons. They have not raised their voices. Hell, they've

barely looked at Johnny Tyler who's holding a freaking shotgun.

Given only this one scene, what sort of conclusion might we reach about Wyatt Earp? Pretend we're just coming into the story, and pretend we know nothing about Wyatt Earp, from fiction or history. This scene is still wildly successful at establishing a critical aspect of Wyatt Earp's character. The mere mention of his name turned hot-blooded Johnny into a quivering mess. Johnny, without saying so, tells us everything we need to know: Do not cross Wyatt Earp even if you've got the drop on him with a shotgun.

This little bit takes up less than two minutes of the film's 130 minute run time. If it was the only thing on which we had to base our knowledge of Wyatt, we'd know plenty.

It's rare in good movies for the good guy or bad guy to walk around talking about how good or bad they are. Doing so makes them sort of cartoony (and there were many cartoony villains in 1980s action movies, which we'll get to in another chapter). It is far more effective to let those who orbit the main characters, particularly in the beginning, do most of the heavy lifting. While it is true that we know a person (or character) by the actions they take, having a walk-on or supporting character talk about or react to the main characters gives readers a nice rounded portrait to work with.

If we meet a man who smiles and says hello to everyone he meets, we'll get an impression. If in chapter one a little boy recoils from him fearfully, clutching his mother's leg

when that same man passes by, are we going to ignore that? Nope. Something's not right with Mr. Smiley, even though not a single character spoke a word about it.

Try this technique if you find your good guys and bad guys needing a bit more exposition. It can also be used to build suspense. In the case of Wyatt Earp and Johnny Tyler—again, if we only had this one scene to judge by—chances are good Wyatt's going to run into someone who will want to take things further than Johnny Tyler did.

Thanks to Johnny's mewling "Thank you!" we can't wait to find out who.

BEVERLY HILLS COP

Released December 5, 1984

Directed by Martin Brest

writing credits:

Daniel Petrie Jr., screenplay

Danilo Bach, story

Daniel Petrie Jr., story

TAKEAWAY

Put exposition into scenes where possible,

where something is happening.

Obstacles come in many forms.

SYNOPSIS

Detroit cop Axel Foley goes in search of the people who killed his friend, a small-time hood who had stolen bonds from a smuggler living in Beverly Hills.

BREAKDOWN

Eddie Murphy had a pretty loyal following for his standup (e.g., his special *Delirious*, 1983) and stint on *Saturday Night Live* (1980 – 1984) when *Beverly Hills Cop* landed in theaters and catapulted Murphy into the rarefied air of Hollywood stardom. For good reason: *BHC* was funny then and retains its great comedy now, and the action beats still resonate.

BHC became the highest grossing film of the year, and that's saying something; 1984 was a good year for movies, which included (in no particular order) *Sixteen Candles*, *The Terminator*, *Ghostbusters*, *The Karate Kid*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Footloose* . . . and thousands more.

You might think at least one writing tip from *BHC* would be about humor in fiction, but no. Writing humor tends to be a natural gift, in my opinion; if you have it, it can be developed, but if you don't, you're better off not forcing it. Furthermore, a person can be funny in person but not necessarily know how to write it in narrative, prose form. (I certainly like to think I can write humor in my novels, and maybe a few people have laughed a bit, but I do not bank on humor in my fiction. It's too subjective for my comfort level.)

Rather, *Beverly Hills Cop* offers quick notes on very tame but important elements of storytelling: exposition and obstacles.

Show, Don't Tell, The Exposition

BHC expertly and concisely blends exposition and Axel's motivation all at once via his old friend Mikey Tandino (James Russo). We learn that Axel and Mikey were troublemakers in their youth (and that Mikey still knows how to pick a lock, which is how he gets into Axel's apartment). As kids, Mikey took the fall for Axel when the pair were caught stealing a car. We can presume that such a conviction would have excluded Axel from becoming a cop. When Axel asks him, all these years later, why Mikey

never gave Axel up, Mikey answers simply, “Cause I love you, man.”

That’s all the background we need to get the plot started. But notice how effortlessly this scene transpires: we know from Mikey’s first appearance that they haven’t seen one another in a long time, and that they are good friends. This relationship is cemented when they go out to a bar for a few drinks and to shoot some pool. Mikey brings up the car-stealing escapade while they are drinking and laughing at one another. It’s not forced; it’s exactly the kind of memory and nostalgia two buddies would bring up in this circumstance. But the exchange between Axel and Mikey is tight and concise, taking only a few minutes of film time, yet accomplishing a huge amount exposition.

The writers aren’t finished yet:

Mere moments after Axel gets his drunken friend back to the apartment, Mikey ends up dead, killed for stealing bonds from his employer in Beverly Hills (himself a drug dealing crook, we’ll soon learn).

Aaaaaaand...done! The movie has started, the plot has kicked off, and we’ve bought in completely.

The one word you need to know, and which we’ll return to in another chapter, is economy. The economy with which the *BHC* writers establish Axel’s devil-may-care attitude, his cocky confidence, his sense of humor, and his devotion to his friend is well worth looking into. That they also establish all this in active scenes while consequently setting up the plot underlines how well the story is written.

Even Allies Can Be Obstacles

The other tip from *Beverly Hills Cop* comes not from protagonist Foley, but rather from Beverly Hills Police Department Lieutenant Bogomil (Ronny Cox).

Axel has already met Bogomil a couple of times in his quest to prove that wealthy art dealer Victor Maitlin had Mikey killed. While Bogomil has at long last come around to believing Foley's claims, he's also a by-the-book cop compared to the freewheeling Detroit native. Having convinced him that Maitlin's up to no good, Foley now wants to enlist Bogomil's help in bringing the villain down.

The lieutenant, however, won't sign on, citing lack of evidence:

Bogomil: [W]e don't have enough to get a search warrant.

Foley: Come on, guys, I know how we can get around—

Bogomil: We don't "get around" search warrants in Beverly Hills.

That is conflict. That is an obstacle.

Foley's goal, from the first reel (back when they had reels) is to find and catch Mikey's killer. What he's uncovered is lot bigger than just the one murder, but now the guys who are supposed to be on his team—cops, no less—are getting in his way. They are being obstacles. We have no doubt by this point that if Axel says he can get a warrant, he can do it—he's already living in a suite of the Beverly Palm Hotel with no plan on paying for it, among his other crafty schemes. Yet all it takes is one sentence—one—

from an authority figure and an ally no less, to cut Axel off from this route to catch the bad guy. That's a super-efficient obstacle.

Furthermore, it raises the stakes. Up until this moment, it would otherwise seem that the force of the Beverly Hills Police Department can be brought to bear in Axel's quest. Now? He's back to being the lone wolf against a much stronger villain than he'd thought.

It's important to note here that Bogomil is the antagonist, but not a villain. The lieutenant is the hero in his own movie, playing by the book, doing things the proper way. And, hey, let's be honest: He's right. If Foley goes after Maitlin with guns blazing, no matter how strong the case is against Maitlin, it'll likely get thrown out of court. So Bogomil is only doing the right thing—and that right thing stands directly in Foley's path.

Awesome!

In discussions (with yourself or other writers and beta readers) about antagonists, villains, and obstacles, it's important to grasp that obstacles come in many forms and from many places. Mom saying "No" to your kid protagonist is just as big an obstacle as Bogomil saying "No" to Foley.

Both characters—whether little kid or Detroit cop—now have to find a way around that obstacle.

And that's the story.

FIRST BLOOD

Released October 22, 1982

Directed by Ted Kotcheff

writing credits:

David Morrell, based on his novel

Michael Kozoll, screenplay

William Sackheim, screenplay

Sylvester Stallone, screenplay

TAKEAWAY

Everyone is human.

Everyone thinks they are right.

SYNOPSIS

Decorated Vietnam veteran John Rambo breaks out of a small town jail after severe PTSD flashbacks, setting him and the town sheriff on a violent path, bent on one another's destruction.

BREAKDOWN

Like Sylvester Stallone, I never actually did a tour of combat duty in Vietnam. Or anywhere else for that matter, unless you count nine years at a private parochial school.

Despite my not being a combat veteran, I still tear up every time, and no matter how many times, I watch Rambo's

speech at the end of *First Blood* about his friend getting blown up by a shoe shine boy.

I mean, they are *man tears*, of course, but tears all the same.

For those of you who only know the name “Rambo” by reputation, I hope you won’t skip this chapter. While *First Blood* is technically the first entry in a (seemingly endless) series of films, it bears little in common with its four sequels. Furthermore, while it technically falls under the “action” genre banner, there is a lot of subtlety happening in this film, including fantastic performances by both Stallone and Brian Dennehy, who plays Sheriff Will Teasle.

John J. Rambo is a young Special Forces Vietnam vet and Medal of Honor recipient who has lost everyone and everything. We’re introduced to him right at the moment his literal last friend on earth has died. Needless to say, he’s not having a great day. He wanders into a small town (called Hope! I love it!) and wants a bite to eat. Instead he is “courteously” escorted out of town by Sheriff Teasle—himself a Korean War combat vet. Rambo bucks the invitation, earning himself a quick arrest for vagrancy, resisting arrest, and carrying a concealed weapon.

Rambo’s incarceration inadvertently triggers his post-traumatic stress disorder (which likely would have been called Post Vietnam Syndrome at the time; PTSD was not added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until 1980, and certainly small-town sheriff’s departments weren’t receiving training on it). After needless taunting by the deputies, Rambo suffers crippling flashbacks of being tortured as a POW. He violently breaks

out of the “hick-town” jail and escapes into the mountains. There, quite possibly in self-defense depending on your worldview, he causes the death of a deputy. (FYI, there will be a potentially shocking death count at the end of this chapter if you have not seen the film.)

What unfolds next is the pitting of two combat veterans against one another which manages to include all three major types of plot: man against man; man against nature; and man against himself. Kudos to the filmmakers for getting all three bundled into one film so convincingly.

We’re All Human, Especially Our Heroes

Lesson number one from this movie relates to the differences between it and its chest-thumping sequels: John Rambo in *First Blood* is thoroughly human. He screams! He gets hurt! Contrast that with *Rambo III*, when he uses gunpowder to cauterize a shrapnel wound that is open on both sides of his body, without so much as a grimace. The Rambo in *First Blood* is a relatively skinny guy who gets cold, gets hungry, gets hurt, and very rightly freaks out when attacked by rats.

He cries. He gets scared. He’s just a guy. He’s a well-trained, bad-ass guy, yes, but still just a guy.

So too is his nemesis, Sheriff Teasle, expertly wielded by Brian Dennehy (who pretty much expertly wields every role he’s ever played). Teasle is older, carries a not-small belly above his utility belt, and hasn’t seen real combat in years. He tells Rambo early in the film that this is a quiet, boring town, and that his function is to keep it that way.

Rambo quietly echoes this sentiment with what might be a hint of regret; like maybe this is exactly the kind of life he'd like to lead, too.

There are genre expectations of our heroes and villains, of course, and they should be respected in your novels. However, there is something compelling about good guys and bad guys who can get hurt. Most of our big cinema culture heroes began as regular Joes—John McClane in *Die Hard*, Conan in *Conan the Barbarian*, Riggs in *Lethal Weapon*. Then as the sequels get more and more crazy, these fallible, flesh-and-blood protagonists grow into unassailable robots who we can't even identify with any more. In *First Blood*, when Rambo leaps from a cliff into a grove of trees, nailing every branch on the way down, and screams out in agony when he hits the ground . . . man, I *get* that. When he squeals in pain and disgust as rats swarm him in a tunnel, I believe it.

And I wonder if he's going to make it out of there alive.

On the other hand, none of us has any doubt whatsoever that the Rambo in *Rambo II* (or *III*, or *IV*, or *V*) is going to win, alive and well. It takes a bit of the fun away.

Of course, not every genre is about literal life and death, and that's as it should be. The point, however, remains the same: Humans are tough little creatures in many ways, capable of surviving all kinds of horrific things. But we're also prone to getting wounded—externally and internally—and those weaknesses ought to be celebrated and exploited in your fiction for good guys and bad guys alike.

We All Believe We Are Right

We talked earlier about antagonists vs. villains. We return to that topic in *First Blood* as we look at the motivations of both Rambo and Teasle.

Rambo is, of course, the protagonist in this story because the story is named after . . .

Ah ha! Wait a second, see what's happening already? His character name is *not* in the title, so we can't really default to Rambo being the protagonist and Teasle being the antagonist merely by virtue of "Rambo" being the title of the movie.

The film opens with and follows Rambo initially, but ultimately, what is so great about this movie is that both men desperately want something and will stop at nothing to get it. The characters share just about equal screen time. So who actually is the good guy or bad guy? Tough to say, because they both make mistakes and they both have understandable reasons for behaving the way they do.

After Rambo has disabled the entire police force that came into the forest after him, Teasle gives in and calls the National Guard for help. But then along comes Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna, a last-minute replacement for Kirk Douglas), who wants to protect Teasle and the soldiers *from Rambo*, not the other way around. While Trautman clearly enjoys shit-talking Teasle, the sheriff doesn't budge.

"You know, we're just a small hick town sheriff's

department, Colonel,” Teasle says with a hard glint in his eye, “but we’re expected to do our duty just like our heroes in the special forces!”

What a fantastic line! It’s moments like these where both Dennehy and the script really shine, because in them, we can totally empathize with Teasle’s point of view. He’s a cop, dammit, and cops have a job to do, period. They don’t get to choose which guys to go after and which ones get a pass because of their prior record of service. Remember, no matter the moral guilt or innocence of Rambo chucking a rock at a helicopter that led to the falling death of a deputy (or that the deputy wasn’t wearing his seatbelt after being told to do so by the pilot), Rambo is still responsible for a law enforcement officer’s death. No matter which side of the “He started it!” debate you land on with this movie, Teasle’s got a job to do, and we’d lose all respect for him if he didn’t do it.

It’s perhaps the key thing that makes *First Blood* such a great character study: both men are right and both men are wrong. Both make choices that put him in the black hat, and both make choices he 100% believes are absolutely, morally right.

Feel More Than One Thing

Since both men are human, they are both capable of feeling more than one thing at a time, just like you and me. “Conflict” doesn’t only pertain to the war between a protagonist and antagonist; it can be fully internal and happen in both characters.

Consider when your very best friend in the entire world gets a big raise. You're happy . . . or 99% happy, anyway. But there's always that *liiiiittle* piece down deep that's like, "Dammit! When's my turn?" And that's okay. Or consider, if you are a parent, how angry you can be at your kid, and still love them with a ferocity that is unmatched in the universe when they run into the street without looking.

It's all right; we are human, it happens. This is exactly why it should happen to your characters, too. They are human, or are at least rooted in humanity. If they weren't, we wouldn't be reading your story. Being rooted in humanity means feeling the whole gamut of human emotion and making all the same mistakes humans do. They have to make mistakes and feel more than one thing at once, or they won't be interesting characters.

My favorite Dennehy moment lasts all of maybe two seconds. One of his officers reports on John Rambo being a decorated veteran, just like Teasle. Teasle knows the Medal of Honor and what it means, and there's this oh-so-brief moment where you see him give up the hunt. You can see Teasle thinking, *Let the kid go, he's been through hell, he'll come out of the hills in a few days and we'll take him into custody nice and easy*. Teasle knows perfectly well the hell of war, and it makes him look at Rambo in a new light. He's a fellow combat vet; that counts for something. It's a glorious moment in which, for the character, the movie could end right then and there.

Then the moment is gone and Teasle becomes sheriff again. He orders the deputies further into the woods and

into the mountains, Medal of Honor be damned. It's an incredible little bit of acting on Dennehy's part, and I always wonder if it was scripted or not.

It's the kind of internal conflict that can and should happen to your characters, good guys and bad alike. Give them those moments of doubt, of fear. They don't have to whine about it—Teasle never does. But we often make choices despite our better judgement; so too should your characters.

Perhaps intentionally (remember our mirrors and echoes), Rambo has a similar moment when Teasle first drives him out of town. You can see Rambo considering just leaving things be and walking on to the next town. Then the moment passes, and without a word, you see on Rambo's face that today, by God, he is done being treated like dirt. Having both men make similar judgement calls in the heat of a moment is an excellent echo, the kind you should be looking to build between your protagonists and antagonists.

First Blood is worthy of study for your fiction regardless of what genre you work in, because it illustrates so beautifully two forces who will not stop at anything to obtain their goal. That both of these forces are men with so much in common is what makes the story really gripping. These are guys who otherwise should have been having a beer (much like Rambo's mentor Colonel Trautman does with Teasle later in the film). Instead, they are out for one another's blood, and all because neither of them would give just a little ground.

Death Toll:

I promised you a death count in the presumably ultra-violent movie *First Blood*. If you haven't seen it and don't know much about it, you might think the dead can't even be tabulated.

Actually, there is exactly and only one death.

That's it. There's some blood, but much less than you can see these days on prime time TV. That one death acts as a catalyst for the second act of the story, too, so it's not like it's some random uniformed guard like we might see getting mowed down in *Rambo II, III, IV, or V*.

So give *First Blood* a chance if you haven't already, and hit me up on Facebook or Twitter and share which man you think was in the right.

The good news is you'll be correct no matter what. Because in fiction, it's the struggle that matters, not the victory.

P.S.:

The novel by David Morrell on which the movie is based is fantastic, but differs from the film in many ways. I've met the author, and he is a great guy as well as an excellent writing teacher I took pages of notes during a one-night class he taught. But again, the reason we're using movies is because they are so much more accessible to the average person, so I'm keeping my focus there. Just know that *First Blood* is a damn fine novel, well worth picking up.

HIGHLANDER

Released March 7, 1986

Directed by Russell Mulcahy

writing credits:

Gregory Widen, story and screenplay

Peter Bellwood, screenplay

Larry Ferguson, screenplay

TAKEAWAY

*If you need a prologue, you may have started the story
in the wrong place.*

*Successful high concepts tend to be simple,
but must be supported by actual characters.*

SYNOPSIS

A group of men are completely immortal unless someone cuts off their heads. At some point in the future, all who are left will fight to the death, leaving only one. The One will gain superpowers to do with as he pleases.

BREAKDOWN

That's it. That's the plot.

It is simple, and there is elegance in that simplicity (not to mention a rockin' score by Queen, and guys cutting each others' heads off in New York City. Come on!).

Highlander is a damn fun modern fantasy movie. It doesn't hurt that Sean Connery plays a supporting role, because: Sean Connery. It's also the first film most people remember from Clancy Brown, later well-known as Hadley, the sadistic guard in *The Shawshank Redemption*, and a prodigious amount of cartoon voiceovers. He plays the film's bad guy, Kurgan, with absolute relish and delight. He's one of the few villains out there who seems to enjoy villainy for villainy's sake, and that's hard to pull off. More on that in a moment.

Start Where The Story Begins

Let's address what I'd call the film's biggest weakness: the prologue.

There's nothing wrong with how it is written or what it says. It appears on screen while being narrated by Mr. Connery:

From the dawn of time we came; moving silently down through the centuries, living many secret lives, struggling to reach the time of the Gathering; when the few who remain will battle to the last. No one has ever known we were among you... until now.

Now, granted, it sounds badass when narrated by Sean Connery. The problem is: is it necessary? Is there anything in the prologue that we need to know before the story begins? The answer is no. Everything contained here is explained sufficiently in scenes in the film.

Does your story *really* need a prologue?

Fantasy genres are notorious for their prologues, whether short and sweet like this one or going on for many pages. Fans of the genre generally don't mind them at worst, and a handful even prefer them as genre conventions.

For our purposes—regardless of what genre you write in—seriously ask yourself not only if the prologue is needed, but if it doesn't simply mean you began your novel in the wrong place.

We want to start the book as close to the action as possible, if not right in the thick of it. Again, there are genre expectations that sometimes should be met, and not every novel ought to begin with the heroine in a life-or-death struggle. But by and large, the story's main problem—the thing the protagonist will be struggling against—ought to be either established or at least hinted at by the end of the first chapter.

In the case of long prologues, the question to ask is: Does the audience need to know this information right now, or can it be threaded throughout the narrative? The relative length or brevity of the prologue is not the issue; the issue is if the information it conveys is better spread around in the opening chapters.

The shorthand as I learned it goes like this: Never tell us anything before we absolutely need to know it.

Keep It Simple (On The Surface)

Another great thing about *Highlander* is its elegant plot. By “elegant,” I mean unencumbered; streamlined. The high

concept is straightforward (whether you think it's ridiculous or not is up to you, and we're not talking about tastes here!). Buncha guys can only be killed by decapitation, and one day they'll fight each other until only one is left, and he gets superpowers known as "The Prize."

The end.

Which is neat. But it's not a *story*, and I'd argue it's not a plot. A plot needs characters, and a story—a good story—needs characters we care about.

Christopher Lambert plays Connor MacLeod, one of the Immortals. He is found and trained by Connery's character, an Egyptian named Ramirez (just go with it) who's already been alive a couple thousand years. Ramirez begins training Connor to face Kurgan, an evil man who, if he wins the Prize, will throw the world into an eternity of chaos and darkness.

So there's our plot. Connor wants to prevent Kurgan from winning the Prize.

While that's enough to satisfy an English term paper, it's not enough to make a compelling story. What makes *Highlander* successful is that Connor is damn near clinically depressed; he watched his wife grow old and die while he remained forever young. Ramirez cautions him early on to let her go, that Immortals face great pain when they allow themselves to love.

Now things are more interesting, and we've got a cool theme to play with: Is immortality all it's cracked up to

be? Despite his skill with a sword—all the Immortals use swords to kill each other—at no point does Connor act like he’s pleased with his fate.

He is not motivated to win the Prize, he’s motivated to prevent Kurgan from winning it.

That’s an interesting take for a hero, and makes for a much more empathetic film. Yes, it’s an action-fantasy movie with sweet sword fights (and some really fun dialogue, by the way), but the script allows the story room to breathe and draw us in with a main character we can feel for.

Make sure your protagonists fit that bill in some way or another. They don’t have to be heroes, and they don’t have to be morose and broody; they just have to have traits we can identify with.

(By the way, for all that is good and holy, please skip the sequels. Just . . . yeah. Don’t watch them. When your logline is “There can be only one,” you might want to keep your promise.)

THE KARATE KID

Released June 22, 1984
Directed by John G. Avildsen
writing credits:
Robert Mark Kamen, writer

TAKEAWAY

Don't let your villains be cardboard cutouts.

SYNOPSIS

A kid from New Jersey gets bullied by his SoCal black-belt classmates until a kindly fix-it man teaches him karate.

BREAKDOWN

So how can *The Karate Kid* improve your writing? I'll tell you, but first: Wash all car. Then, wax.

Kidding! We're not talking about Mr. Miyagi today. And not Daniel Laruso, the film's gangly star. Not Kreese, the movie's super-smarmy Big Bad, and not even Johnny, the Best Villain Of All Time. No, today we talk about:

Bobby.

You should remember Bobby Brown of the Cobra Kai dojo as the sympathizer: the one who tries to end

Daniel's extreme beating on Halloween night; shows great hesitation when ordered to cheat to get Daniel out of the tournament; and who shows great remorse when he goes against his better judgement and, ahem, *sweeps the leg*.

But look at the film closely:

Bobby's hesitation does not begin on Halloween. Of all the Cobra Kai jerks—Johnny, Tommy, Bobby, and Dutch—Bobby is the least Jerk of the group, and we learn that about him from the very first time we meet the Cobra Kai boys on the beach. When Johnny disassembles Daniel at a beach party the night before school starts, Bobby is the last to leave, looking back at Daniel as if to make sure the kid isn't permanently injured, and showing clear signs of not being totally on board with Johnny's overwhelming punishment of a weaker kid. It's true that we never see Bobby stand up to Johnny, Cobra Kai sensei Kreese, or the rest of the Cobra Kai students. Indeed, he apparently has no problem trying to gang up on an old man in hand-to-hand combat with his buddy Tommy on Halloween night. So Bobby is no saint.

But he consistently shows remorse and doubt about his actions and those of his friends and mentors. It's that choice—whether by the actor, script, or director—that keeps the Cobra Kai gang from being total cartoons. (Sensei Kreese is, of course, completely over the top, and we love it. Johnny, too, is played to the hilt. Wonderfully!)

What could have been an otherwise throw-away villain has been given dimension in *Karate Kid*. (I always thought Dutch was a lot more frightening than Johnny, with his

Kiefer-Sutherland-blonde-Ace-Merrill look. Johnny might be reasoned with. Dutch will just drop you.) There are plenty of things that make *Karate Kid* such a classic film, and allowing Bobby to be just another bully with the rest of the Kais would not have *detracted* from the story. But having him show reluctance and remorse *adds* to it.

Don't let your villains be cardboard cut-outs. Give them a life and dreams of their own. Kreese as a cardboard cut-out works in *Karate Kid*, but it's a hard thing to pull off. While we don't spend a lot of screen time with Kreese, what little we do know of him is that he surely must believe in what he's doing. He believes, strongly, that teaching these boys his militant brand of karate is the right thing to do. Since the film is not exclusively about the conflict between a wispy teenage boy and a grown man/karate champion/Vietnam Veteran like Kreese—because that would be odd and sad—we don't need a lot of info about Kreese. We're happy to watch Daniel and the Kais who make his life miserable while mostly focusing on the story of friendship between Miyagi and Daniel. Giving one of the villains a personality beyond a lust for mayhem and torture rounds out the Kais very nicely.

In fact, all the Kais have a function. Tommy is the jerk who gets everyone riled up. (Remember his laugh? Ugh!) Dutch is the barely restrained rage that makes Johnny look like a sweet little sunflower. Bobby is along for the ride, but harbors doubts, and Johnny is the golden boy who rules over it all. This isn't Darth Vader and a million clone stormtroopers; these are individual villains brought together under a villainous teacher. Apart, Dutch would probably still pick fights, Tommy would release that

asshole giggle of his any time an old lady tripped on the sidewalk...but Bobby might not be such a bad guy. Even Johnny—for all his arrogance—might at least not push people around if not for having an audience and a sense of entitlement as big as California.

Give your villains a conscience from time to time. Note, for instance, Bobby's counterpart in *First Blood*, where wee little David Caruso plays a deputy who, from the very beginning, follows orders but vocally opposes how Rambo is being treated. He gives voice to Teasle's misgivings, which makes for a more well-rounded story, just like Bobby's reticence rounds out Daniel-san's antagonists.

Remember: bad guys—*good* bad guys—always want something. There is always a goal brewing under the surface. Double check to see if your villain is all bad, all the time. Or, are there times when he's capable of great compassion, remorse, or even a dash of reluctance? We cheer for Daniel at the end of the film, but we also forgive Johnny when he admits Laruso is all right.

That's a "good villain" at work. Bobby following orders is a bad choice, but when he instantly rushes to apologize, we give Bobby a little grace, too.

He's earned it.

P.S.

There are multiple "take downs" of this movie on the Internet, alleging that Johnny is the real hero and Daniel is a petty thug. They're not wrong when you dig into the

script, but it was the 1980s, and our villains were still cartoons while our heroes were shiny and golden. The age of the antihero was yet to arise. So, yes, nowadays we need to take *The Karate Kid* in its historical context.

You're the BEST! Arrrrroooooound! Nothing's gonna ever keep ya down...!

JAWS

Released June 20, 1975

Directed by Steven Spielberg

writing credits:

Peter Benchley, screenplay and based on his novel

Carl Gottlieb, screenplay

TAKEAWAY

Try being the new guy.

Work towards economy in your narrative and dialogue.

SYNOPSIS

After a New York cop takes a job in a small beach town, a monster man-eating shark begins feasting on the locals and threatening the town's primary economic engine: The summer tourist season.

BREAKDOWN

Summertime! Let's fire up *Jaws* and watch it while floating in the backyard pool, eh? (Something I will never, ever do, by the way.)

What aspect of writing fiction might we learn from the Father of the Summer Blockbuster? (It was the first film to make \$100 million.)

There are many to choose from in this A+ of a film, but I'm choosing two that probably slipped by unnoticed: One set of three lines, and character backstory.

Police Chief Martin Brody, father of two boys and happily married to Ellen, came to Amity Island from New York City where he was a city police officer. A dangerous job, to be sure. Almost from the beginning, the family seems to wonder if beach life is really all it's cracked up to be, and Brody's at odds with the city council and just about everyone else over this minor little shark issue.

About halfway through the film, Brody's oldest son has just been brought to the hospital to be treated for shock after seeing a fisherman eaten by the titular character. In the hospital, Brody hands over his sleeping youngest son to his wife, saying, "Why don't you take him home."

Half-hopefully, half-joking, Ellen Brody replies, "New York?"

"No," Brody says, unsmiling. "Home here."

That's it. That's the first thing we need to talk about.

What's so great about this minor—almost throwaway—exchange of dialogue is its economy. Hold on, we're coming back to this.

Jaws is not about Brody wanting to return to New York, or about the trouble his family is having fitting in with this new community. But those things do exist in the story, which brings us to point two: Being the New Guy in town.

Being the new guy offers a whole new set of obstacles for the main character. Have you noticed how many of your favorite stories are about a character out of her normal environment? That's not an accident. For example, if the Brodys were from Amity, then Ellen's reaction to first meeting the surly shark-hunter Quint wouldn't have the impact it does. The grizzled fisherman scares her, and makes her all the more scared for her husband who's going out with Quint and a nerdy scientist to capture or kill a great white. *Her* fear ramps up *our* fear.

This fish-out-of-water arc (if you'll pardon the pun) is not the primary concern of *Jaws*, but it's a great base layer to build this excellent story upon. Being The New Guy makes things harder for the protagonist and it helps move the story along. Again, if Brody was an Amity native, his fights with the town council over closing the beaches (an argument he loses and which leads directly to the near-death of his son) wouldn't be nearly so incendiary and thus would be much less thrilling overall as the fear over the shark's rampage grows. The tension on land is real and dynamic (and as Mrs. Kitner can tell you, has real-world life-or-death consequences).

This film influenced my own writing in many ways. For example, in my novel *Sick* (which is about a sort-of zombie apocalypse set at a Phoenix area high school), I chose to have the protagonist not be a "drama kid" despite the bulk of the book being set almost exclusively in that drama department. Why? So the readers—most of whom would not be drama kids—could experience the setting and tropes of a high school drama department through similar eyes. They learn things at the same time my protagonist does.

Jaws uses the same approach. Having Brody be a new guy in town lets us as the audience learn about Amity, and about sharks, at the same pace as the protagonist. *Jaws* as told from Quint's point of view would be, I daresay, incomprehensible or boring. If *Jaws* was told by him, we'd either be horribly confused by his fisherman's lifestyle and lingo, or bored silly because the story would have to keep stopping to fill us in on backstory, life and politics in small town Amity, etc. etc. Or, to refer back to *Highlander*, imagine Brody narrating a prologue over the opening credits. Ugh. The mere thought sucks the life right out of the movie.

Since New Guy Brody is the character we're following, we learn things at the same rate he does, so the backstory, exposition, science, and so on has an immediacy to us that doesn't slow down the story.

Now back to the hospital:

When Brody says to Ellen, "No. Home here," what we're seeing is Brody turning a corner. In this economical little husband-wife moment, the writers and director let us know that Brody is in this for the long haul. That damn shark nearly killed his boy. The smart thing to do is move back to New York. But Brody's had it; this is war now. *We're not running away, honey. Amity's our home now, and I swear by all that's holy that I'm gonna make this shark pay for what he did to my son, to that young girl, to that little boy, and I'm not letting it happen to anyone else.*

He says all that in three words.

In your writing, aim for that kind of economy. There could have been a big fight scene between Ellen and Brody

wherein she argues that they should all go back to the Big Apple. And that would have been fine.

But not *good*. Good is just this quick exchange that cements for us Brody's position and goal for the remainder of the story.

That's economy.

PULP FICTION

Released October 14, 1994
Directed by Quentin Tarantino
writing credits:
Quentin Tarantino, stories and written by
Roger Avary, stories

TAKEAWAY

*Dialogue can and should be used
for double duty whenever possible.*

SYNOPSIS

Several unsavory stories and characters interweave over the course of a day in Los Angeles as one criminal questions his purpose in life.

BREAKDOWN

“Forget it, it’s too risky.”

That’s how you start a story, friends.

Well . . . some stories, anyway.

If you just read my book on writing dialogue, you know I make a lot of noise about the “purpose of dialogue.” That dialogue should always have a reason for being on the page. But can’t good dialogue just be good, without me

coming along and making a big stink about it? Aren't there any number of examples in film and fiction of dialogue that is awesome but that doesn't necessarily accomplish any of the things I espouse?

Sure. Sort of.

Let's take *Pulp Fiction*. The entire opening "hamburger scene" between Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vince (John Travolta) lasts fourteen minutes, starting from the time we meet them in the Jules's car until Jules and Vince shoot Brett. How much of that time is spent on "action," or on dialogue that "moves the story forward"?

At first glance, it appears that not much time is actually spent on moving the plot. What do these two loveable murderers talk about? Hamburgers. (Cornerstone of any nutritious breakfast!) Foreign takes on hamburgers. (Royale with cheese!) Foot massages. Pilot television shows.

That's . . . about it.

Even once we get into the apartment, Jules doesn't launch right into Brett's interrogation or torture like a sensible action-movie hit-man would. He lets his presence do the talking while he chats up Brett and continues have foodie discussions, of all things. Jules doesn't even raise his voice until ten minutes into the scene.

Why doesn't Jules get right to work?

This entire scene—from car to gunfire—could have been wrapped up in two, maybe three minutes. And would have

in any other action movie. (*Pulp Fiction* is not an action movie in the traditional, '80s sense of the word, but has all the trappings of one, which is why I keep comparing it to that genre.)

So then what's with all the banter? It's witty and entertaining, but why bother? Doesn't it just sit on the page, so to speak, looking pretty?

I'd argue No. Hamburgers and foot massages and all the rest of it actually are serving a few purposes:

The easiest to point out is the entire exchange about Mia Wallace getting a foot massage from one of Marsellus Wallace's henchmen, "Tony Rocky Horror." Word round the campfire is, Marsellus sent Tony over a fourth-story balcony and into a greenhouse, severely injuring Tony and almost killing him, all over the perceived offense of having given Mia a foot massage. Jules and Vince disagree on whether or not this punishment fit the crime, if in fact giving a foot massage to a man's wife is a crime at all. (Sidebar: Notice Vince refers to her as a "new bride," not a wife; a notable distinction.)

Upon first viewing the film, many of us sit back in awe over the fact that this foot massage issue is a nonsense discussion, considering Jules and Vince have just finished pulling weapons from the trunk en route to who-knows-where to do who-knows-what. We can't believe they're even talking about this while clearly on their way to do some ultra violence.

But the entire sequence is accomplishing something

crucial: It's introducing us to Mia and Marsellus Wallace, two characters who are going to become of utmost importance to the other protagonists of the film. The entire Tony Rocky Horror story reveals character about Marsellus and Mia. Whether the foot massage story is true or not doesn't matter. We learn how these two henchmen feel about Marsellus and Mia both. When Butch (Bruce Willis) double-crosses Marsellus, we know from the first scene that this is bad news. When Vince takes Mia out on a friendly date and Mia nearly dies under his care, we can't help but root for Vince to find a way out of his mess because we're already terrified of Marsellus. (How characters talk about other characters is one of the best ways to learn about them, remember?)

The whole "TV pilot" discussion has very little, if anything, to do with the plot or theme of the movie. But it shows two guys able to make fun of each other. When the foot massage argument gets heated, it is still friendly.

Even the body language—the "blocking," or physical action—has Vince with his hands in his pockets just moments after Jules warns him that he's getting a pissed at Vince's jokes. This is not a guy who fears his buddy on a real level. Another example of how blocking matters: Jules' finishing of the Sprite (one of the most chilling moments in cinema history, in my opinion) tells us volumes. Why does Jules finish poor Brett's Sprite?

There's a simple answer, and we know it on an instinctive level: Brett won't be needing it.

So here are Jules and Vince, paid assassins . . . and we root for them to succeed in whatever challenge they're up

against!

Why? That leads us to point number two about the Brett scene:

Vince and Jules are friends.

I'm leaving that as it's own little paragraph because it deserves the emphasis. What Tarantino's superb dialogue (and its excellent delivery by the cast) shows us is that these men are fully realized people. In any other hands, they might be cheap knockoffs of henchmen. Instead, they have many of the qualities we all want in close friends: A sense of humor. Loyalty. A protective sense of watching the others' back. These are admirable qualities, and rather than showing them bust into a room guns blazing, Tarantino takes his time with these seemingly absurd discussions about foot massages and Royale With Cheese to illustrate that these men have a relationship. Does the dialogue entertain us? Yes. But it's doing double duty.

Our dialogue should do the same whenever possible.

This relationship between Jules and Vince is important for understanding the climax of the film in the breakfast restaurant. (Sidebar: Notice how Tarantino echoes the first [well, second] scene with the last? Technically of course, the first scene is in that same restaurant, but even if it weren't, we have this echo of eating a breakfast-type meal at the top and bottom of the story. It's not groundbreaking, but it's satisfying to our storytelling natures. We won't get into it here, but do study the structure of this film sometime.) Jules has had a life-altering experience back in the apartment

after shooting Brett. Now he and Vince are going to have a chat about it. Two mere assassins could not have this talk—it's about the kind of deep, personal, even religious parts of our being that only our close friends are privy to. Liam Neeson's Bryan Mills (*Taken*) character would never have this chat with any incarnation of James Bond. It's not necessary, for one thing, but you see the point here? Tarantino's not just telling a whiz-bang gangster flick, he's after something much more. And, in my opinion, he delivers. The relationships matter, both within the story and to us as its observers.

In the breakfast restaurant, the two men again engage in what appears to be absurd chit-chat about pigs, dogs, and breakfast food. Just like the first scene in which we met them, they're talking (in part) about food; and, it would seem, not much else. When the talk turns to Jules's epiphany, then it becomes the kind of back-and-forth disagreement friends have. No thug in any action film would put up with Vince's attitude; Jules would shoot him in any other picture. Not so here. Again, we have characters having honest conflicts and struggling to solve them with dialogue.

This extends to the robbery that occurs moments later. Sure, there are pistols drawn and we're fully expecting someone to get gunned down. (Of course, at this point in the film, we know Vince's fate.) But not a shot is fired.

What propels that wonderful stand-off between Honey Bunny, Pumpkin, Vince, and Jules? Dialogue.

It's all talk.

And we're riveted. One of the reasons we're riveted? Because we've seen these two men interact, we've seen their bond, and we're worried about them. Jules has already killed three men this morning alone, and yet in this scene, we're rooting for him to win because he's just had this amazing life-changing experience and we don't want it taken from him. We don't want his redemption to go down in a hail of gunfire at a pseudo-Denny's.

That's good dialogue, folks. That's what it can do. Heck, we're even worried about Honey Bunny and Pumpkin based on a short opening scene in which we're shown (shown!) their relationship, too. We know they're criminals. If they did to you and me what they do in the restaurant, we'd want them arrested if not killed. Instead, Tarantino takes those two bad guys and shows us their humanity, which ramps up the tension when the four bad guys are moments from gunning each other down.

So. Did a conversation about Royale With Cheese set all that up? I argue yes, it did.

I used this example in my dialogue book, and didn't realize it was from *Pulp Fiction*.

A server comes up to Honey Bunny and Pumpkin in the film's first scene, smiles, and says, "Can I get anyone more coffee?" To which Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) replies, "Oh, yes! Thank you," and gives the server a lovely smile of her own, like she is truly grateful for the great service.

Why is this exchange here? It looks like a throwaway set of lines, what purpose does it serve?

To surprise the hell out of us when Honey Bunny whips out a gun and shouts, “Any of you f**king pr**ks move, and I’ll execute every last f**king one of you!”

The exchange with the server has a job to do, it doesn’t just sit there being humdrum dialogue. It lulls us, building suspense without our realizing it. Thus, when Honey Bunny pulls the gun: BANG! The movie’s started.

In closing remember: if you ever drink a venti Frappuccino, you just had a five-dollar shake.

SAY ANYTHING...

Released April 14, 1989
Directed by Cameron Crowe
writing credits:
Cameron Crowe, writer

TAKEAWAY

*Speaking of bad guys—antagonists, specifically—
motivate yours out of love whenever you can.*

SYNOPSIS

Following graduation, kickboxing student Lloyd Dobbler woos valedictorian Diane Court despite the misgivings Diane's father.

BREAKDOWN

Damn you, Lloyd Dobbler. You set an impossible standard, you know that? Way to ruin it for the rest of the boys who can never hope to achieve the bar you set for us.

Still . . . like Superman, the fun is in having the guiding light to aspire to.

Pop quiz: Who is the antagonist of *Say Anything*...?

Well, let's presuppose that Lloyd (John Cusack)—determined to spend his summer dating Diane Court (Ione

Skye)—is our protagonist. An argument could be made that the film splits its POV roughly in half, with Lloyd and Diane comprising two parts of a whole, but humor me for the moment and let's say Lloyd's our good guy.

Who's our bad guy?

Diane's dad, James Court (played marvelously by John Mahoney), is the first name that probably comes to mind. And I think that's mostly right. If Lloyd is our protagonist, then he must want something, and something else must stand in his way. It's an obvious choice to say Lloyd "wants to spend the summer with Diane," and that James Court stands in his way.

But part of *Say Anything...*'s enduring beauty and appeal is that while Lloyd is the consummate good guy, Mr. Court is not the consummate villain.

The argument for Mr. Court being the antagonist is interesting (to me) because he doesn't really directly present obstacles to Lloyd. He's not after Lloyd, he doesn't want bad things to happen to the kid. He's no Darth Vader, no Sauron.

He's just a dad who wants the best for his kid. Diane got a scholarship to travel abroad, and he wants to make sure she makes the most of this opportunity, that's all. (That Lloyd happened to show up this summer is as much an obstacle to Diane as Mr. Court is to Lloyd.) He doesn't directly set out to thwart what Lloyd wants, he only sets out to help his daughter the best he knows how. Those are very different things . . . unless you're Lloyd, in which case, motive is irrelevant.

But even without Mr. Court urging her on, Diane herself is sometimes Lloyd's pen-giving antagonist. She puts up obstacles to what Lloyd wants. Yes, maybe Dad encourages her to break up with Lloyd, but he doesn't force her. Diane thinks for herself throughout the movie, and some of those thoughts include breaking up with Lloyd, no matter how much she cares for him.

That brings us to love.

Say Anything... still matters and still works because it is gentle, sincere, and authentic. One of the ways it obtains these aspects is by motivating its primary characters out of genuine love. Mr. Court finds himself incarcerated because he's done some shady financial stuff with money belonging to the elderly folks he cares for. Make no mistake, Mr. Court broke man's law and moral law, and he pays for it. But the movie suggests, and I accept at face value, that Mr. Court is still acting out of love. He argues that he cares for those people more and better than their own families, and this seems to be true. It does not excuse the *wrong* choices the character makes . . . but it's a stronger choice to make on the part of writer-director Cameron Crowe: having this "villain" acting from a place of genuine concern.

(Watch Mahoney's delivery of the line "I'm incarcerated, Lloyd!" Love it!. He savors his use of that word, because no one else uses it in casual conversation. Normal people say "I'm in prison, Lloyd!" But *incarceration* has this jagged and yet oddly humorous note to it. More importantly, it's exactly the kind of word Mr. Court would use.)

Consider motivating your bad guys out of love wherever possible. Few bad guys believe they are bad guys, and that's certainly true with Mr. Court. He believes he is (ultimately) doing right by his elderly clients as well as his daughter. It's his motivation for Diane to succeed in life and make the most of her scholarship that gets in Lloyd's way, just from an indirect angle. It still makes Mr. Court Lloyd's antagonist.

I've been working on a manuscript in which The Big Bad began as nothing more than that: a rather stereotypical rich white guy out to rule the world. It fit within the genre I was working in, and while he was a fun villain to write, he also came off rather stale and old-hat. When I changed his background to include a moment wherein his mother's dying request was for him to find a cure for what killed her, his character suddenly took off in a whole new direction that breathed fresh air into an otherwise paper-doll villain.

(Or so I hope.)

Make those deliberate choices with your antagonists. Let them make choices based in love, and see what discoveries you have yet to make in the story.

PREDATOR

Released June 12, 1987

Directed by John McTiernan

writing credits:

Jim Thomas, writer

John Thomas, writer

TAKEAWAY

Consider how your story will be dated.

*The odds against your protagonist should
be high (in context).*

Subvert your genre—maybe.

Surprise the reader (not to be confused with “twist.”)

SYNOPSIS

A Special Forces rescue team is tricked into going on a mission for the CIA, but finds itself being stalked by a trophy-hunting alien in the jungles of Central America.

BREAKDOWN

If you haven't seen *Predator* before, you might want to stop here and go give it a watch. Far from being a mere action flick, this one had some legit scares and tension lacking in most other Arnie films from the era.

There are several items to discuss with this Schwarzenegger vehicle that can help your book:

Timelessness

Predator has aged well because of its location. For those of us who are unaware of the technological improvements of firearms and helicopters over the years, there's nothing in the film to really date it—it's military guys in a Central American jungle, the end. Obviously it's set in "modern times" but that's about all we're given. It could just as easily be 2017 as 1987.

So the question for your manuscript is this: Must the story be dated to a specific time in history, or can it be made timeless?

There are pros and cons either way. I intentionally obscured the era in which my novel *Zero* takes place, to a couple of readers' frustration. It was an intentional choice, because I worried young readers would immediately dismiss something set in an earlier modern era. (I think I was wrong about that.) But certain locations and times are "evergreen." Central American jungles happen to be one of those places, where modern American cities are not. Too much changes too fast in terms of trends, technology, laws, and cultural norms. All the same, I'm glad my protagonist, Zero, didn't have a beeper/pager in her novel, which is set in the early '90s. While it would have been contextually realistic, I feel like the target audience in 2012 (the year it was published) and beyond would have been turned off by it.

Obviously, you can't predict where technology is going to go, but remember the fate of the pager when you include today's technology in your story. What if you mention a

specific technological brand name, which five years from now goes belly-up due to some catastrophic lack of judgment by the marketing department? Now your hero is stuck holding a relic from a bygone area that might actually make him look dopey or worse. Maybe it's better to refer simply to his phone (for example), and leave it at that. (Remember Sgt. Murtaugh's, uh, "mobile phone" in *Lethal Weapon*? Still a great movie, but everyone giggles a bit when we see him lug that thing around. Maybe a pay phone or the phone at some dive bar would have been better.)

Odds

What are the odds your protagonist will obtain his Goal?

Generally speaking, the reader should set those odds fairly low. There ought to be a pretty good chance the main character is not going to win, whether it's a date to the prom or defeating an outer space alien hunter. Or maybe both. ("If it wears taffeta, we can kill it.")

Predator does a fine job of setting this up. The film starts off with about as much "macho bullsh*t" (to quote Rae Dawn Chong in *Commando*) as you can imagine. Dutch (Schwarzenegger) is the team leader of a group of hard-core rescue operators. Like the Marines in *Aliens*, they are absolute badasses. Jesse Ventura carries a Gatling-style minigun designed to hang off a helicopter, for cryin' out loud! It is awesome. They unsurprisingly, but to our great and manly delight, wipe out dozens of bad guys without breaking a sweat. And Jesse, as we learn, does not have time to bleed, thank you.

We start the film with our expectations pretty well established: these men took out an armed camp all by themselves. They are the elite of the elite. Nothing can stop them. Not only that, it stars Schwarzenegger. We all know he wins. He's been winning handily for the entire decade already. So when these badasses start getting their bad asses killed by the unseen predator, we start wondering just how Schwarzenegger is going to get out of this. We're genuinely concerned about the characters (who are not quite the cardboard cutouts found in most action flicks), and get ever more nervous as the biggest and baddest of them gets gutted by an invisible alien. With each death, the odds of a "happy" ending drop and the tension increases.

Surprise And Subversion

As it pertains to setting up the odds, *Predator* illustrates how to masterfully undercut expectations, which yielded a great Surprise for its time and subverted its own genre.

Understand, first, the historical context of the film: Up to this point, other than as the Terminator, Schwarzenegger never failed to beat the almighty crap out of everything on screen. He always won, and always won easily. Any pretext of failure was fair to middling at best (see *Commando*, for example). When you went to see a Schwarzenegger film, you went in knowing how it would end.

Predator banks on this very thing to make the film work. First it sets up the team as unstoppable warriors, then shocks us when it systematically kills off the baddest of the bad, including Jesse and his Gatling gun. By the time

only a couple of people are left, we're sitting in the theater going, "My God, how can anyone survive this thing?"

Answer: The big Surprise.

The answer is that Dutch is only one of two humans who make it out alive . . . no thanks to him being played by Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Yes, Dutch takes on the predator hand-to-hand, mano-a-mano, but does he really defeat the predator like he defeats his other enemies in his other movies? No. Like one of my favorite examples, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Does Indy get what he wants? Yes . . . but. Does Arnie survive the predator? Yes . . . *but*. Or, if you want to phrase it differently: Does Arnie defeat the predator? Not exactly. (Even the last shot is of an unusually morose and thwarted Schwarzenegger, not at all like his rousing conclusions from earlier films.) It's one of the things many people love about this movie.

There's no twist in the movie; when the alien starts counting down to its own doom, we're not exactly shocked, since he clearly comes from a violent, murderous culture. The predator doesn't take off a mask and reveal he's actually General Phillips, the man who sent Dutch on the mission. No, there are no twists here. All the same, we are surprised when we see that technically Arnie won, but he A) also got his ass kicked, and B) that he didn't actually kill his enemy the way Arnie always does. ("Blow off some steam, Bennett!")

So be deliberate in how you set up your readers' expectations.

Do readers of your genre allow you to twist things around? (Romance generally does not, for instance.) *Predator* could have just been another Schwarzenegger shoot-'em-up, but it wasn't. Not because there's an alien this time, but because our expectations were utterly smashed. Schwarzenegger's protagonist gets his ass roundly kicked. We had never, ever seen that happen before, and we loved it. Now, to be fair, this "twist" played well not because of the story itself, but because of its star. We all went into the theater knowing (i.e. expecting) Arnold to come out on top. So when he didn't, it left us speechless, and it was a great way to go out. A breath of fresh air from the action genre, really.

Regardless of your genre, you must imperil your main character (in his story's context), as Arnold is imperiled in *Predator*. Things have to get worse . . . and worse . . . and worse.

You are writing in a genre, and genres have expectations. You can sometimes defy those expectations to create a richer, more entertaining story. Subverting genre conventions was a choice I made without realizing it as I wrote *Zero*, and a couple of people are still mad at me for it. I didn't intend to "twist" anything at the end, I just told the story I wanted and needed to tell. Some people got it, some people didn't; some people liked it, some people didn't.

That's fine. I'd do it again. Be aware that bending genre expectations is a calculated risk, but one that just might pay off.

THE BREAKFAST CLUB

Released February 15, 1985

Directed by John Hughes

writing credits:

John Hughes, writer

TAKEAWAY

*Characters should always be doing something,
even if quietly.*

SYNOPSIS

Five high schoolers endure a Saturday in detention, starting off as complete strangers and enemies, but discovering they have more in common than they ever thought.

BREAKDOWN

The Breakfast Club is a quiet film, so quiet that director John Hughes had trouble convincing Hollywood it would work. Allegedly, he was told no one would watch a movie about a bunch of teenagers talking. (Oops.) There are no explosions, car chases, or gun fights. There is one switchblade knife (never used), one wrestling move, and a couple of verbal threats that may or may not be sincere. Otherwise—yeah, pretty quiet.

Quiet, though, does not mean nothing's happening.

I once had the honor of co-hosting a special screening of *The Breakfast Club* with two of my best friends from high school, one of whom is now the Executive Director of the Phoenix Film Festival (which you should totally [“Totally?”] check out if you’re ever in town). For as formative as this film was for me, and for as many times as I’ve seen it—I could do a solo shadowcast to within 95% accuracy, I’m pretty sure—I never saw it on the big screen.

Wow. What a difference that theatrical screen makes. No joke. So let’s talk about big screen vs. little screen.

The movie was always great, no matter how small the screen I saw it on. (It has not, however, aged particularly well, much like *Sixteen Candles*. There are many moments now as an adult and parent that are much more cringe-y than they were in high school.) Originally I’d intended to write this chapter on the film’s dialogue, which is outstanding; a moment as simple as Ally Sheedy’s Allison “speaking” for the first time in the film—a one-word bark of “Ha!”—followed by Molly Ringwald’s Claire snapping right back, “Shut up!” is priceless. It’s been like twenty minutes, Allison hasn’t said a single thing, and when she finally interacts, she’s told to be quiet by the school princess. That’s a beautiful thing.

As it pertains to dialogue, this is a great film to study for my oft-repeated mantra: When there’s an exit or entrance, relationships change, and so must the dialogue. Take, for example, the short conversation between Emilio Estevez’s Andy, and Allison in the hall on the way to get sodas. How Andy relates to her is nearly a 180-degree turn from how they related—or didn’t—in the library with other people

around. It's one of the few moments in the film where all five stars are not together, and reveals tons (like Allison's vodka!) about both characters.

And look at the gorgeous construction of this exchange during the confessional scene:

Claire: How are you bizarre?

Allison: He can't think for himself.

Andy: ...She's right.

She has to *tell* him he can't think for himself? Simple, effective, awesome!

Ahem. Anyway. big screen vs. little screen:

In both big and small screens, there's always something happening. Now, this is true of virtually every film, or at least every well-made film. But seeing the eyes, and perhaps behind the eyes, of the characters on a big screen made an enormous difference in how I experienced the movie. When Bender asks Claire if she wants to see "a picture of a guy with elephantitis of the nuts," it comes off as a one-liner on TV; just a little more needling of the prom queen, which we know Bender has enjoyed doing. On the big screen, though, you're able to see much more clearly how he's sort of winding up for this pitch. You can see Judd Nelson's Bender working over the line in his head, getting ready to throw it at her, and how much he's anticipating not only that it'll make her squirm . . . but that there's a small ember of affection in it.

In your fiction, characters should always be doing

something. It needn't be a car chase, gunfight, or making a Pixie-stix-and-Cap'n-crunch sandwich; but actively wrestling with whatever conflict has arisen, even—and especially—if it is internal.

This short bit between Claire, Bender, and Anthony Michael Hall's Brian is ostensibly about virginity and, let's face it, nuts. Only, it's not. It's doing at least two important things: 1) Setting up an affinity between Brian and Claire which will impact how their confessional scene plays out in another hour or so, and 2) Bender's slow-building attraction to Claire, also key for their exchanges and transformations later in the day.

The conflict in this scene isn't so broad as, say, an *Armageddon*-esque asteroid that will wipe out all life as we know it. It's much smaller, more intimate. But it's still conflict. It's Bender perhaps resisting his attraction to Claire on the one hand, and still despising everything she stands for on the other, all couched in crass jokes and banter about virginity. For a movie about a bunch of kids sitting around talking, every shot in *The Breakfast Club* is working toward its goals. John Hughes wastes nothing.

Nor should you. Let every character's thought, word, and deed advance the plot, illustrate character, or reveal something new. If it doesn't, then that line, scene, or chapter maybe doesn't belong. Andy removes layer after layer of clothes during the day; so too does he slowly reveal himself to the others, until wearing only a tank top and jeans, showing more skin than any other character. That is, until after Allison's "transformation," when she

wears . . . what? A sleeveless top. Bam! That's an echo, a deliberate choice that links these two together even more.

Or, maybe it was random coincidence on the part of the costumers, and I'm reading too much into it. That's okay; any time you can find and highlight these coincidences in your writing, do it!

One last bit: If you've not already read up on the trivia for the movie, take note that in the opening montage, we see one student who had been voted Man Of The Year some time ago.

That student? Carl. Carl, who's now the janitor.

Hughes didn't have to do that. But he chose to. It's a teeny, tiny, subtle manipulation of storytelling on his part that whispers to the audience, *Not every kid is what they seem.*

One more example: The students' warden, Mr. Vernon, is certainly the primary antagonist (although all the kids are antagonists to one another at some point). The easy choice for the actor (or you, the writer) is to say, "He's an asshole" and that's it. I won't argue that Vernon isn't an asshole, because he is.

But why tell the kids to write an essay describing for him who they think they are? Other than being the gimmick of the film to get to Brian's response that bookends the film, why would he make that demand of them?

It's easy to say Vernon's goal is for them to sit down and shut up and just get through detention. It's better and

stronger, though, if somewhere inside, he really is an educator—he really wants them to better themselves and become upstanding citizens and not do the kind of things that land them in detention. How that goal manifests is another story (see “Asshole”), but rooting it in a form of love makes for a more solid foundation.

Why?

Because when we love, there’s gonna be conflict. And conflict is the heart of every story.

Now I’m going to go walk under the uprights and raise my fist in the air.

BONUS CHAPTER!

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK vs. THE BIG BANG THEORY

Raiders of the Lost Ark

Released June 12, 1981

Directed by Steven Spielberg

writing credits:

Lawrence Kasdan, screenplay

George Lucas, story

Philip Kaufman, story

The Big Bang Theory

Aired October 10, 2013

Directed by Mark Cendrowski

writing credits:

Chuck Lorre, creator and story

Bill Prady, creator

Steven Molaro, teleplay

Steve Holland, teleplay

Maria Ferrari, teleplay

Jim Reynolds, story

Tara Hernandez, story and story editor

Anthony Del Broccolo, executive story editor

TAKEAWAY

One: Screw you, Amy Farrah Fowler!

Two: We watch, read, and love movies and books for characters. That's it. Without characters we love, a story is just a travelogue, at best.

SYNOPSIS

Daring archeologist Indiana Jones pursues the lost ark of the covenant while Nazis race to obtain it first to exploit its potential supernatural power.

and

A group of geeky friends is traumatized when one of their girlfriends pokes a big hole in the aforementioned plot.

BREAKDOWN

The place: *The Big Bang Theory*, an extraordinarily successful sit-com. Season 7. Episode 4.

Wow, this one caused a lot of consternation on the internet! Sheldon Cooper, an emperor-level nerd, shows one of his favorite movies to semi-girlfriend Amy Farrah Fowler. Immediately afterward, Amy “ruins” *Raiders of the Lost Ark* by arguing that Indiana Jones’s participation in the film is a total null; without him, Amy says, everything would have happened exactly the way it did anyway.

A lot of geeky hearts got broken that night. It was a cruel blow the first time I saw the episode. Her logic seemed unassailable: Indy keeps chasing his Macguffin but the Nazis end up with it anyway and then they open it and then they die. The end. If Indy had never begun his quest to “stop” them, there’d still be an island full of dead Nazis.

Some argue that what happens after the Ark is opened and closed again is the important thing; that Indy is able to take possession of it and keep it out of Nazi hands. That's a fair point, though not the one we are examining here. Some others argue that he should have let the Nazis take it, open it up in Berlin to kill Hitler, and end the war. Yeah, okay, *but that's not what the movie is about.*

I reckon there's around a 50/50 chance that you were at least a passive fan of *The Big Bang Theory*, considering the size of its viewership. So you may have seen this episode yourself. What say you? Was Indy's involvement in the chase for the ark completely pointless?

No, I say!

For our purposes as writers, the argument I want you to take away is this:

Even if *Raiders* would have happened the same way without Indiana Jones, we are not invested in Nazis, or the Ark itself, or a wicked French archaeologist. We are invested in Indiana Jones and his relentless pursuit of the ark.

RELENTLESS. Because it deserves all caps.

For crying out loud, Indy leaves Marion behind with the Nazis in order to continue his quest for the Ark. He is one driven son of a bitch.

That's why we watch. I mean, Indiana Jones is a bon a fide grave robber, yet we cheer like hell for him. He's everything

we ever wanted to be, and we're on his side from the first time he disarms an assassin with his bullwhip. So cool!

From a no-nonsense, practical perspective (absolutely fitting her character), Amy is right: without Indy, everything basically happens as it would have happened anyway.

But from a strictly storytelling perspective, Amy is flat-out wrong. It's kind of too bad that she missed out on the fun of going with Indy on his adventure. While neither Amy nor your readers are required to fall in love with your characters, *you* are. Plot holes can be fixed. Themes can be strengthened. Dialogue can be improved. Description can be reworked.

A great character we can fall in love with and who we can't wait to see in action?

I don't know that there's a technique for that.

Did I miss anything? Still have questions, or even corrections? Talk to me at:

facebook.com/AuthorTomLeveen

or on Twitter, Instagram, and everywhere else
@tomleven.

*I offer short critiques on the two most important parts of your novel: page one, or the query letter sent to agents. For a personal critique of your first page—the one that will determine if an agent or editor will keep reading—or your query letter, contact me at **fiverr.com/tomleven**.*

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About the Author

Tom Leveen is an award-winning author of nine novels with legacy publishers. His novel *Hellworld* was a Bram Stoker Award finalist, and he has written for the comic book *Spawn*. He is a frequent speaker and teacher at junior high and high schools, colleges and universities, conferences, and the like. He is a native of Arizona, where he lives with his wife and children.

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