

Four Basic Principles in Writing Fiction

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Introduction

Writing fiction isn't easy. For some it is intuitive. For others it requires hard work, perseverance, and close attention to form and technique. If you are going to learn to write fiction, you will need to know a few basic principles. These principles include point of view, characterization, plot, and conflict. These principles can be exercised in many different ways. How you choose to exercise them is what will make your story distinctively different from anyone else's.

Point of View

Point of view determines how the story will be told or narrated. As such, some choices have to be made. You must ask yourself: Will I tell this story in 1st person, 2nd person, or 3rd person? In 1st person a story is narrated using the pronoun "I." The character telling the story is part of the story, which means that the narration is limited to that character's observations and opinions. He may narrate his own story or someone else's, but in either case it will always be his story. After all, he is the one telling it. Thus the advantage of 1st person is also its disadvantage. It may offer you a sense of control in working through a single character, but it also provides limited flexibility as the narrative is restrained by that character's singular experience.

In 2nd person a story is narrated using the pronoun "you." The narrator could be speaking to someone specifically within the story or just be referencing "you" in general. If the narrator is speaking to someone within the story, the narrator is a character within the story, but if the narrator is referencing "you" in general, he may actually be the narrator of the story writing directly to his reader (i.e. you). The advantage of 2nd person is that it is slightly more flexible than 1st person as it presents the option of two different narrators. However, the disadvantage of 2nd person is that it can be complicated and confusing. If it is to be used well, it requires careful control. If it is not carefully controlled, it can quickly become cumbersome, awkward, clunky, even irritating. 2nd person tends to work best when it is a narrator within a story speaking to another character. So make it clear that your narrator is speaking directly to another character and avoid mixing its use with the usage of "you" in general. Using "you" in general is generally best avoided, that is, unless you have an intentional reason for it.

In 3rd person a story is narrated using the pronouns “he” or “she.” The narrator tells someone else’s story from the outside. He may narrate by showing, that is, describing the story’s characters, events, and scenes using only what can be seen or heard, or by telling, that is, depicting the characters, events, and scenes by summarizing them, interpreting them, or commenting on them. The advantage of 3rd person over 1st person or 2nd person is that it is much more flexible. 3rd person offers a range of narration from objective (purely descriptive) to omniscient (all-knowing). Using 3rd person allows you to move unhindered between the external and internal worlds of one or more characters. While 3rd person provides ultimate flexibility in terms of point of view, it may also be difficult to control. So it is wise to clearly distinguish each character and organize shifts between characters’ points of view.

Characterization

Character signifies human experience. It includes many elements such as a body, a mind, and social circumstances. A character must have a body. This is called physical characterization. Give your character a mole or a crooked knee. Allow your reader to see your character. For example: in Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Dickens depicts Mrs. Sparsit as that woman “with the Coriolanian style of nose and the dense black eyebrows” (Dickens 47). In this way, Dickens allows us to see his character, to picture her.

Moreover, a character must think and feel. This is called psychological characterization. Give your character thoughts, assumptions, biases, feelings, doubts, fears, hopes, and dreams; and give your character a desire. For example: in *Hard Times* Dickens’ describes his character Louisa as having a “starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression. Not with the brightness natural to cheerful youth, but with uncertain, eager, doubtful flashes, which had something painful in them, analogous to the changes on a blind face groping its way” (19). Here Dickens allows us to understand the inner dimensions of his character, Louisa—inner dimensions that have a profound impact on the events that play out in the story. In Dickens’ novel we learn that Louisa wants to make her own choices in life, “that she would have been self-willed...but for her bringing-up” (19). She does not want to be controlled.

So what does your character want? Ice cream? A girlfriend? To save the neighbor’s dog? To kill it? This can often be very difficult to determine. But once you clearly decide what your character wants then you should keep your character from achieving that want either by the internal issues your character struggles with or by the external struggles your character engages. In either case, a character’s struggle is the story and should constitute the bulk of it.

It may sound simple, but developing a character's struggles requires lots of practice. Why? Naturally, we avoid them. We are averse to them; but as a writer, you must embrace them, even manipulate them. A writer is a manipulator. He manipulates his reader by abusing his character. The reader, on the other hand, is manipulated. That's why a reader reads: to be manipulated, to sit down and read a good story, to struggle alongside a character and reach resolution with that character. A reader enjoys this. So give it to him. Let him have it. As much as you love your character don't avoid abusing him. If you love him, let him suffer. You can always make things right in the end. Allow your reader to see the world through the eyes of your character and to want what your character wants.

Lastly, give your character social circumstances. Your character must come from somewhere and have some kind of social profile. Give or don't give your character an education, money, a family, friends, a religion, a hobby, a special taste for squid. Allow your reader to see the world from which your character comes.

Plot

Plot is different from characterization. Plot equates to events. A character must have experience; but if there are no events in your story, what can your character experience or react to? In *Hard Times* Dickens places his two characters, Louisa and Thomas, whose lives are micromanaged by their practical-minded father, Mr. Gradgrind, in the path of a traveling circus, at which point we find "Louisa peeping with all her might through a hole in a deal board, and...Thomas abasing himself on the ground to catch but a hoof of the graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act" (18)! It is a singular event that has enormous consequences as the unimaginative and well-ordered lives of two characters are ruptured by the possibilities of the artistic and unrestrained, consequences which result in a succession of dramatic events. So give your story interesting, character-testing events. Does your character get pushed out of a car on the way to school or does that malicious girl two houses down fall out of your character's front yard tree and land on his head? How your character reacts to the events he experiences can define his character.

As your mind swells with events, you must consider how you will structure those events in order to form a story. When you consider the structure of events as a whole, you will realize that your story must begin somewhere and end somewhere else. A story is, after all, a story. It requires a beginning, middle, and end. Your story, therefore, should begin at some interesting point, travel upward as it builds on that beginning with rising action and character development, reach a climax involving the peak of a character's problem or the most

alarming moment of a character's experience, and finally make a short descent as the story achieves some kind of resolution to that problem or experience. This structure is formerly known as the Fichtean curve (i.e. the upside down check mark).

Remember, a story that doesn't start somewhere is a story that never gets written. So you must begin at the place you think is most interesting. An interesting beginning could involve an event such as a perilous situation for your character (a man braces himself against a rope at the sandwich shop as a St. Bernard plants its paws on his chest) or it could involve something embarrassing (a girl, picking her nose behind the wheel of her car, gets honked at by that cute guy from the baseball team) or it could involve an image or description such as the milieu of the country corner shop or a row of daisies bobbling in the wind. It is interesting if it engages both the reader's imagination and emotions.

In *Hard Times* Dickens chooses to begin with "the one thing needful" (9) and that is to talk about "Facts": "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else" (9). In this way, Dickens establishes point of view, characterizes a central character, engages the central conflict, and sets his story's events in motion.

The story begins with dialog which allows us to see that a character is speaking. We may, therefore, conclude that the character is speaking to someone. Furthermore, his dialog is provided in quotes, which tells us that someone is narrating his speech. The facts tells us that this narrative is in 3rd person point of view, a point that is confirmed when the 3rd person narrator writes, "The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations, by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve" (9). These external descriptions of scene and character indicate conclusively a 3rd person point of view. In the first two paragraphs we also learn a great deal about the physical, psychological, and physiological characterization of Mr. Gradgrind. He has a "square forefinger," he is obsessed with "facts," and the fact that he is standing in a schoolroom giving a speech tells us he is an educated, possibly middle-to-upper class, man. Moreover, we are presented with the central conflict. Are facts alone wanted in life? What about imagination, creativity? Are they not also wanted in life? This dichotomy forms the basis of all conflict within the story, and Dickens presents it in his opening lines. And finally, the tangible action of Dickens' character standing in a schoolroom giving a speech to an "inclined plane of little vessels" constitutes an event.

After your story has had a character and events that occupy both space and time, it then must end at a higher plane than it began. The peak of this higher plane is called a climax. The climax occurs when the character has reached the highest point of internal and/or external crisis, the point from which the story must turn if your character is to make it out alive. Every story's climax is different. It is the point at which only you can determine. It is the point at which your mind tells you the struggle will never end even as your heart tells you it will.

As your story makes its short descent from the point of climax (ultimate conflict), it must reach for and achieve some kind of resolution, at which point you have arrived at the end of your story. While that resolution could be achieved by way of a dramatic turn, it could also be achieved by a simple shift in direction.

A dramatic turn achieves an obvious resolution (Gradgrind's daughter, Louisa, confronts her father about her upbringing and "[curses] the hour in which [she] was born to such a destiny" (208); she has made an obvious turn of mind, heart, and action, and the resultant change is distinct: "I shall die if you hold me!" she says. 'Let me fall upon the ground!' And he laid her down there, and saw the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet" (212)); whereas a shift in direction achieves a more subtle resolution (the relationship between Stephen and Rachel is unclearly redefined: "he avoided every chance of seeing her; for, although he knew that the prohibition did not yet formally extend to the women working in the factories, he found that some of them with whom he was acquainted were changed to him, and he feared to try others, and dreaded that Rachael might be even singled out from the rest if she were seen in his company" (143). This shift shows that their relationship has been "muddled," as opposed to abolished, due to the uncommunicated fear of potential disgrace arising from their association.

Conflict

Conflict, on the other hand, is what disturbs a character. It can be internal or external. If conflict is internal, it resides within the character. In this case, a character may not want to go into the pet store to look at dogs because he remembers getting bitten by a dog on his newspaper route as a child; and he can't bring himself to even look at them, even though he wants to buy one for his girlfriend. If the conflict is external, it resides outside the character. In this case, a character may try to buy a dog, but it is too expensive and the owner won't let him have it for less money. Will he punch the owner in the nose, will he steal the dog when the owner isn't looking, or will he go work harder and come back when he can pay for it?

In *Hard Times* we find a notable moment of external conflict when Dickens pushes Mr. Bounderby, who has concealed the truth about his upbringing throughout the story, to the brink of exposure, during which he is publicly humiliated:

Mr Bounderby's visage exhibited an extraordinary combination of all possible colours and expressions of discomfiture, as old Mrs Pegler was disclosed to his view. "Why, what do you mean by this?" was his highly unexpected demand. "Sir!" exclaimed Mrs Sparsit, faintly.

"Why don't you mind your own business, ma'am?" roared Bounderby. "How dare you go and poke your officious nose into my family affairs?" This allusion to her favourite feature overpowered Mrs Sparsit. She sat down stiffly in a chair.... (251-252)

Here we find Mr. Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit in all-out verbal struggle. Insults are thrown; emotions, overpowered. Conflict occurs when a character is so disturbed he is forced to react; the greater the disturbance, the greater the reaction. Consider the case of Mr. Bounderby. Not only has he concealed the truth about his upbringing throughout the story, he has positioned himself as the man who picked himself up by his own boot straps and made something of himself despite the absence of any and all opportunity, a lie he uses to justify his judgmental attitude toward the uneducated laborers who slave for him in his factory. He of all Dickens' characters in the story must conceal the truth; he must hide it, for if the truth be told it would shame him red. Louisa, on the other hand, experiences internal conflict when Dickens pits her inner desire against her father Mr. Gradgrind's external pressure:

"You are, we will say in round numbers, twenty years of age; Mr Bounderby is, we will say in round numbers, fifty. There is some disparity in your respective years, but in your means and positions there is none....The disparity I have mentioned, therefore, almost ceases to be disparity, and (virtually) all but disappears."

"What do you recommend, father," asked Louisa.

"Confining yourself rigidly to Fact, the question of Fact you state to yourself is: Does Mr Bounderby ask me to marry him? Yes, he does. The sole remaining question then is: Shall I marry him?"

"Shall I marry him?" repeated Louisa, with great deliberation.

"Precisely. And it is satisfactory to me, as your father, my dear Louisa...." (98)

Throughout this interaction between Louisa and Mr. Gradgrind, Mr. Gradgrind dispassionately presents Louisa with the pressure of marrying Mr. Bounderby, a man twice her age; yet throughout, Louisa struggles to express her feelings by asking her father whether or not she should do what she secretly does not want to do. Dickens writes: “Perhaps he might have seen one wavering moment in her, when she was impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart” (99). As Mr. Gradgrind continues to pressure Louisa, it becomes increasingly difficult for her to openly and honestly communicate her desires.

Whether you decide to incorporate internal or external conflict or any combination of the two, remember, a story must have conflict. A story isn’t interesting without it. So allow your reader to experience as much conflict as you are capable of conjuring. Be willing to place your characters in the most perilous and alarming moments of distress imaginable. In short, let your characters experience “hard times.”

Conclusion

The choices you make involving point of view, characterization, plot, and conflict will be unique when they are the choices you make. If the story is focused on character, character will drive and define the story’s events. If the story is focused on events, events will drive and define the story’s character. As you make these choices, the story will unfold and you will find yourself smack in the middle of exciting drama before you know it.

Which way you decide to write is up to you, but you must remember that writing requires you to know how to use the basic principles outlined here. So it is best to do exercises focusing only on one technique at a time until you feel comfortable and confident using that technique. When you have experimented with and learned each writing technique (point of view, characterization, plot, and conflict) you will come to recognize how interwoven all the elements of craft are and how they work together and influence each other, at which point you can mix and match techniques, using them how and in what ways you like in order to tell the story you are burning to write.

Work Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.