

A GREAT BOOK STARTS FROM WITHIN

Your 7 inner writing tools &
how to nurture them



Introduction

Before we begin, let me just reassure you of something. Despite what my brand name and the title of this short guide suggest, what I'm about to share with you is practical advice not hippy woo woo.

Okay, maybe it's just a little woo woo if looking within yourself is not something you usually do. But given you're here, reading this, it's safe to assume you're a fiction writer, and therefore looking within should come fairly natural.

So why did I write this guide? Well, because I have a philosophy of fiction writing that creative writing courses and advice articles tend not to address in any great depth, if at all, but that I want to share for those of you who fear, fret about, or doubt that you have the capability to write a book readers will love, or to do so repeatedly to sustain a long-term career.

By the way, if that's you... [polite cough] you're wrong.

A PHILOSOPHY OF FICTION WRITING



Let's get philosophical

This guide is about you not me, but indulge me for a moment so you'll understand where I'm coming from.

Almost a decade ago, at the beginning of my fiction editing career, I diligently purchased Strunk & White's [The Elements of Style](#) like all good grammarians.

Now, maybe it's because the original book was published over a century ago, or maybe it's because I've never been very tolerant of rules, but after reading I shelved it in a fit of seething irritation, and somewhere between then and now it appears to have miraculously vanished.

It's not that my tendency towards broader thinking blinds me to the necessity for guidelines that make our language accessible to all, but that there was something about *The Elements of Style* that, certainly when it comes to fiction, was far too restrictive and, well, stuffy.



Let's get philosophical

Fiction to me (in my fifth decade of voracious novel reading and writing) is fluid. In the same way that creativity is fluid, and ever-changing, and enlightening.

When we think about what creativity is, we usually take it to mean the very opposite of rules, restrictions, glass ceilings and boxes. Creativity is freedom - of thought and expression. Fiction - is creativity sculpted with words.

Actually it's more than that. Fiction writing is a gut instinct. It's a desire - beginning in the writer and ending in the reader - to explore, to share, but above all to connect.

The connection points that close the gap between writer and reader are what make a piece of fiction engaging and memorable, more so than strict adherence to form. And in case you were wondering - you don't have to memorize or be taught how to make these connections. It's intrinsic. You already have the capability. In spades.

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a white shirt and a striped tie, is shown from the chest up. He has a glowing lightbulb on his head. The background is a chalkboard filled with various mathematical equations and diagrams, including $5+2=20$, $x+y=a^2+b$, $m_1=m_2$, $x^2+y^2=2y+3x$, and $x=0$.

THE SCIENCE PART



The science part

Now if this is still sounding too hippy for you, let's look at the science.

If you thought reading fiction was all about escape into entertainment, consider this quote from the 2013 study, [How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation](#) (P Matthijs Bal & Martijn Veltkamp).

“Two experiments showed that empathy was influenced over a period of one week for people who read a fictional story, but **only when they were emotionally transported into the story** ... Moreover, enhancement of empathic skills through fiction reading can **contribute to people's goals of who they want to be** in their lives, such as to become a person that cares for other people's welfare. Hence, **sympathetic reactions to fictional characters are integrated into broader response patterns in daily life.**”

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3559433>



The science part

This raises two important points:

- Firstly, your fiction can not only please and entertain, but through emotional transportation has the potential to **change readers**, such as increase empathy, provide valuable insights that lead to personal growth, and/or change worldviews on people, settings or circumstances;
- Secondly, the formal technicalities of writing a novel - plotting, characterization, scene setting, development arcs, grammar, syntax, and so on - won't mean a jot if your story doesn't **move your readers** in some ways.

In other words, write what you know, show don't tell - what these vague, technically-minded concepts are really driving at is: **make us feel something**.

How do you do that? Well, let's talk about you and your in-built writer's toolbox...

YOUR INNER WRITER'S TOOLBOX





Inner writing tools

At its most fundamental, there are two elements to writing a novel.

There's the technical side, of outlining and planning and plot structure, and so forth. Let's call it the skeleton. Then there's the emotional aspect - the injection of feeling that brings the story to life in a way that engages readers. We'll call it the pulse.

Let's be clear - the skeleton is important, and can be learned either by close observation, e.g. reading novels or watching movies (movies follow a similar structure to books), or from creative writing classes, instructional books, or a helpful editor.

However, it is the pulse that really brings your fiction to life in the minds and hearts of readers. Without it, your story will be no more moving or thought-provoking than a tourist information guide. Luckily though, the pulse is what you're already an expert in.

Still don't believe me? Let's start with tool number one - what it is, and what to do if it stops working. (By the way, stick around for the bonus, non-hippy tips and techniques that come later.)



1. IMAGINATION



Imagination

As a fiction writer, you know how to let your imagination run riot; building worlds, events and people out of nothing, and making connections between concepts or situations that others simply wouldn't. More than that, you have a knack for seeing things differently, thinking outside the box - and from this emerge original ideas.

You're also an observer. You like to stand back and watch things unfold from an outsider's perspective. This allows you to consider multiple viewpoints, but also to see things others may be too close to notice. You enjoy spending time alone and you're a deep thinker. You were a daydreamer as a kid, and maybe still are as an adult. You're an avid reader of fiction; you could map your life, and lessons you've learned, by the books you've read and how they influenced you.

All of which means that when your cultivated imagination meets the reader's, you make connections in all kinds of ways - unexpected, surprising, familiar, or revelatory.

Imagination is your inner writer's tool number one. But it doesn't always play ball...



The problem with imagination

The mind's ability to conjure up things that don't currently exist might, in any other context or on any other planet, be considered a superpower. And if so, then writing long-form fiction would be an elite bonus superpower. Because let's face it, to write a novel requires your imagination to be turned up to eleven.

When it works it's fantastic (think of those heady days of writing your first stories or first novel that you doubted anyone would ever read). But when it doesn't work, it feels like you're wading through sludge. And while many things in your daily life can force your imagination to suddenly put the brakes on, the worst culprit for slowing the flow of ideas is... well, it's you. Your own pesky mind.

This may occur early in your writing career, or when you're in the thick of it, but at some point the freedom that once allowed you to write happily with abandon gets interrupted by all kinds of doubts (about your abilities), worries (about deadlines), expectation pressures (will this book be as good as the last?), and the dreaded burnout (never having any ideas ever again, and tired of trying).



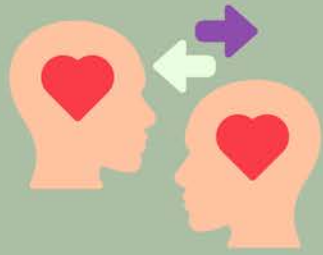
Coax your imagination

Whether you've experienced any of these imagination-blockers or have never had a problem expanding your mind and reaching for new ideas, there are still ways you can keep your imagination fresh during those times when you're not writing. I break these down into active imagination care, and passive care. Active is adding to the well of knowledge and ideas, passive is allowing space for those ideas to percolate.

- **Active.** Engage in new experiences: visit new places, meet new people, learn new skills, hobbies or activities; immerse yourself in different cultures; research unfamiliar topics; study other art forms - broaden your music tastes, read widely, visit the theatre, opera, museums or galleries; eavesdrop on conversations, etc.
- **Passive.** Take breaks regularly: spend time in nature; meditate if you're so inclined; incorporate physical exercise into your day, shifting your attention from your mind to your body; avoid spending more time writing than you need to or originally planned; prioritize downtime, taking care of yourself, and sleep; take longer breaks when needed, scheduling a week, or several, away from writing.



2. EMPATHY



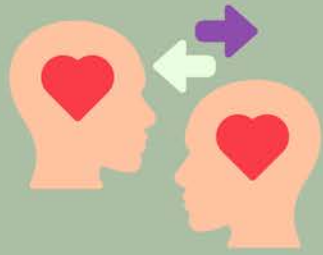
Empathy

Broadly speaking, empathy is an understanding of the human experience - the ability to comprehend another person's perspective and how they might feel.

Some of us are more sensitive to people's feelings than others, but luckily, establishing empathy for your characters and the situations you drop them into is easy for you. It's why you write fiction in the first place. To step into different characters' shoes, to try on their lives temporarily, to indulge yourself in what it would feel like to be them. All of them. Even the unpleasant ones.

Likewise, as a mindful observer, you understand the subtle differences between personality types, different actions and reactions, what drives individuals or holds them back. And when you inject this depth of understanding into your characters, your readers consciously or subconsciously pick up on it too, immediately establishing a connection, regardless of their level of empathic sensitivity.

Empathy is an essential tool for the fiction writer. But it needs handling with care.



Empathy self-care

For a character in your novel to be authentic, you'll dig deep into who they really are on the inside, what's shaped them into the individual they've become, and why they act and react the way they do. This process of essentially shrugging on another person's life like a winter coat can be both exhilarating and terrifying. As such, it's important to be mindful of what your limits are.

Whether you are utilizing your own experiences of past events or stepping into new territory, be aware of topics that may churn up old traumas or that you might simply find too distressing to explore. Connecting your readers to your characters is your goal, but not to the detriment of your own health.

Writers, and creatives in general, are sensitive types - it's what enriches your work and makes it fundamentally important to the human experience - but it also means choosing your subject matter with care. If you feel yourself straying into territory you wish you hadn't, pull back and change the story direction, or start a new project. The health of the writer must come before the writer's work, always!

A background image showing a person's hands holding a magnifying glass over a smartphone screen. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt. The magnifying glass is held over the screen, which displays some text and images. The overall image has a soft, slightly blurred quality.

3. CURIOSITY



Curiosity

As a fiction writer you are naturally curious - about people, the human experience, the world, everything. You were the kid who always asked “Why?”, and the adult who still asks “Yeah, but why?” You want to know what makes an individual tick, why societies do things the way they do instead of a different way, and how on earth the human race could have gone so horribly wrong at certain points in history.

You’re particularly curious about new ideas, new possibilities, new ways of doing things, and these are concepts you explore through your writing. You may obsess over particular areas of interest (such as beekeeping or nuclear fusion or serial murder), and these become the thread, theme, or genre of your stories. Or you may choose a whole new area of interest with each new book.

“What if...?” is your favourite question, and your innate curiosity flows through your writing to capture your readers’ attention and make that longed-for connection. But, uh, what if... your curiosity wanes halfway through writing your book?



Keeping curiosity alive

Like imagination, there are no downsides to curiosity, it's pure joy. But there are occasions when lack of motivation kicks in and you lose interest in your story or the will to finish it. No problem. Here are a couple of things you can do to get back on track.

- Firstly, check you haven't written yourself into a corner or gone off piste. Easily done. You might just need to go back a few scenes and consider a new "what if..."
- Reconsider your characters and plotlines: are they falling flat; is there something you can add to spice them up and make them more interesting to write, such as a unique physical or personality trait - or a secret, an argument, an unexpected weather event or visitor that throws everything into disarray?
- Experiment with writing style or perspective - a different tone, "voice", or POV could reignite your curiosity and desire to keep writing.
- Stay open to surprises. Avoid adhering so strictly to your outline that you ignore the hollering muse. See where new ideas might take you; backtrack if needed.



4. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



Emotional intelligence

Fiction, at its core, is about human emotions and relationships (yes, even *Watership Down*; anthropomorphism at its best). As a fiction writer, you understand complex emotions, and your high emotional intelligence helps you create characters who are realistic and relatable to readers.

Your understanding of the subtleties of human emotion allows you to convey its qualities without the need to overly exploit them. Likewise, as already mentioned, you understand why people behave the way they do and what their actions are driven by.

With this innate knowledge and curiosity of human behaviour, you push the boundaries and limitations of acceptability and expectation by putting your characters into difficult, fearful situations, or by having them face impossible moral dilemmas, from which both you and your readers are connected by that most critical of story questions, “How on earth will they get out of this?”

Emotional intelligence sits comfortably beside empathy in your inner writer’s toolbox.



Honing emotional intelligence

Like intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence is not static and can be developed. While as a fiction writer you may think you have human emotions all figured out (I'm a writer and certainly think this), there's always more to learn. By expanding and honing your emotional intelligence, you open up your work to greater possibilities and more chances to connect with readers. Here are some ways to do that:

- When we think we know everything about people, we're in danger of creating stereotypical or repetitive characters and tying them to clichéd plots. So remain open to learning about people, cultures, places and experiences other than your own. The world really is your oyster, there is always more to discover.
- Treat every new book you write as a new experience. Avoid assuming you have your characters figured out, and instead dig deep and learn from them as you put them through their paces. Remember, no two people react in the same way. Sometimes you may need to explore something new in order to produce something different.



5. INTUITION



Intuition

Even if you haven't received any formal creative writing training, you have a strong sense of what a story needs to make it complete, and how it will unfold in stages - beginning, middle and end. We could trace this back to being read to as a child, and/or your passion for fiction reading. Either way, you have by now developed an intuition for what makes a good story, and how to meet readers' expectations.

You instinctively know when a story has something missing (even if you don't know what it is specifically), and when it lacks tension, pacing or resolution. You know that good fiction flows naturally, and you have an intuitive sense of how to balance dialogue, action and description in a way that keeps readers engaged.

While you may or may not have mastered the finer techniques of fiction writing, you have a strong intuitive sense of when a story is working and when it isn't, either your own work or another author's.

Which begs the question - why do you doubt your natural instincts so much?



Trust your intuition

That last question was an assumption. But I'm willing to bet my mortgage (take it, please) that there are times when your intuition is screaming at you to do one thing in your fiction and you do something else instead. There are many reasons for this and they all lead to the same doorstep - lack of confidence.

This is particularly rife when you're a new writer, but it happens at all stages of your career. It only takes one bad review, one critical editor, one pushy publisher, or one raving reader, and the foundation you've built your authorhood on comes crumbling down. It's utterly tragic and frustrating, and I wish I could offer free tea and hugs to all the writers who lose trust in their writing instincts over something so inconsequential.

So here's my advice. No matter what happens outside of your writing space, **TRUST YOURSELF IN** your writing space. It doesn't matter if your editor has to tweak it later; when you write from that intuitive space in your gut, you write with feeling, and that comes through on the page for your readers to absorb. Not all of it will work, but trust me, some will be pure gold, the best you've written or thought you ever could!



6. PATIENCE & PERSEVERANCE



Patience & perseverance

Fiction writers can't afford to be impatient. When you set out to write a novel, you're prepared for the first draft to take weeks or more likely months, and that's just the start. After the first draft comes more weeks or months of extensive rewriting, editing and refining. You're in it for the long haul and for this you need endurance.

You have an intrinsic capacity for patience, or you develop one, as you write, rework drafts, and improve your craft over time. You accept that, by default, as a fiction writer you'll always be learning, sometimes regretting but never going backwards; your training will last your entire career, but it's worth it to connect with readers.

There are downsides to being a writer, many, but you're developing a protective outer layer against them. You know, for instance, that publishing is competitive and rejection is part of the process no matter how you publish, but your innate ability to bounce back, and your passion for writing, will help you keep doing what you love.

Still, there are moments when you might wonder: Would it be easier just to stop?



When patience & perseverance wear thin

When weariness hits, here's what to do.

- Take a break if you can, as much time as you need, and step away from everything writing-related; time away from your desk might be all that's needed.
- Revisit your goals; why did you start doing this, what were you hoping to get out of it, do your goals still excite you, is something holding you back from progressing towards them? Take a deep dive and be honest with yourself.
- If your goals no longer hold the same appeal, could it be they need adapting rather than binning altogether? What about an easier schedule, or a change of genres, or new routine or writing space? Writing is a creative pursuit, it pays to keep it fresh and ever-changing, just as you as a person are ever-evolving.
- If your current project is the problem, consider getting feedback, preferably from someone with industry knowledge, a well-informed beta reader or editor. If you have an agent/publisher, discuss your concerns with them.
- Lastly, write something no one else will see, to remind yourself that writing is fun!



7. SELF-DISCIPLINE & FOCUS



Self-discipline & focus

Writing fiction is a commitment. It requires dedicated time and prolonged periods of concentrated focus. To get the book done, to hone it so it will engage your readers, you sit down regularly, block out all other distractions, disappear into your own head, and commit to the work of drafting and rewriting.

You are tremendously self-disciplined and self-motivated. In the early days especially, no one is on your case about getting the work done - your motivation and desire to see it through come purely from within. Likewise, your writing is largely a solitary endeavour. But you are comfortable in your own company, and your in-built ability to work independently on such a big project is key to sustaining a long-term career.

Writing aside, the publishing, promoting, and marketing of your book also require your self-discipline and focus. And while working on a new book alone is where you are happiest, at some point an increase in demand on your mental energies may threaten to destabilize your focus and derail your best efforts.



Keep the fiction fires burning

After several books, you may start writing your first draft with the demands of your publisher, your readers, your brand or genre front of mind. Rather than going with your gut, unleashing a firestorm in the first draft that no one needs to see and you'll clean up later, you instead start questioning yourself, reining in your wild mind, putting "logic" before creative freedom. Remain vigilant for this; you'll need to catch it before boredom, mediocrity and burnout kick in and wear you down.

"Write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open," Stephen King wrote in his craft memoir, [On Writing](#) (2020, Scribner, Simon & Schuster, New York). Or rather, the first draft is for you, redrafts and editing are for the reader. Both are essential, to balance originality with relatability.

Post a reminder somewhere front and centre above your desk that when it's time to write a first draft, the conditions must be right: **Firmly closed door to your room - wide open door to your mind.**



ROUND-UP



Finally...

If there's one piece of advice I can leave you with, that I feel very passionate about but it rarely gets mentioned, it's that if you **trust in yourself, listen to your gut instinct, and feel your way through your writing**, you will produce a manuscript with the potential to wow readers.

Yes, it may just be step one in the process, it might take time and guidance from others to craft it into publishing shape - but when you write from your centre, you write something worthwhile, something with pulse that your readers can connect to, including those from countries on the other side of the world and cultures far removed from your own. And that's worth everything. It's what fiction writing is. A sharing of this human experience.

BONUS: Enough practical-based hippy woo woo. Read on for some top tips on how to thread emotion through your novel in a way that engages readers and connects them to your characters and story.

THE TECHNICAL BIT

Tips for threading
emotion through your narrative

BONUS



HELP... I get what you're saying, but how can I actually make that connection with readers on the page?

Step one:

Avoid overthinking it in the first draft. As we've talked about, when you write as if no one will read what you've written, you really go for it. Maybe some of it won't be usable, or will need tidying up, but from that place of authenticity, non-judgement and freedom, original ideas, surprising connections, and unexpected but universally relatable emotions will emerge. So go ahead and dance like no one's watching...! When you're done, come back for step two...

Step two:

Take a break from your manuscript following completion of the first raw draft. When you come back to it, read it straight through, noting how you feel during each scene. Note what strikes you as powerful or moving in any way - they could be keepers; and also note where it falls flat. This could be relating to your characters, their interactions, the setting, the plot, anything. For the flat spots, consider if the following tips and techniques could make the difference.

The background of the slide features a light beige color with a subtle, repeating pattern of small, faint silhouettes of people running. In the upper left corner, there is a larger, more prominent silhouette of two figures running towards the right, holding hands. The text is centered over a horizontal green band.

LEVERAGE CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS



Character relationships

Assuming your cast of characters are fully rounded individuals, with their own particular perspectives, quirks, traits and flaws, you should have no problem developing intriguing relationships between them.

Whether romantic, familial, or platonic - or even strangers - human relationships are a rich source of emotion that every reader can connect with. The deeper and more complex the relationships, the more emotions you can explore.

Tension between characters, even those who care deeply for each other, creates emotional friction that jumps off the page. Don't be shy about it. Your characters will not get along all of the time, even if they're the closest of soulmates.

Every interaction between two people has the potential to be a clash of personalities. It doesn't have to be huge, it could just be an ongoing, underlying niggle. Take a good look at your characters and their relationships and see if everyone is reacting authentically, with the right amount of tension between them.



Character relationships

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Romantic partners are not overly polite with one another, and every interaction between them is coloured by their relationship status and past history (regardless of how happy they may be or appear). Likewise, adult children aren't always respectful to their aging parents, and elderly parents don't always like their children. Avoid letting your own morals and values guide the actions of your characters - your characters are not you (or at least they can't all be).

Techniques: Use misunderstandings, hidden agendas, betrayals, or unspoken desires to heighten the emotional stakes. These may be secondary to your main plot, but even so they create a low level buzz of tension that runs just below the surface of your narrative, keeping your characters on their toes and your readers engaged.

E.g. we all know what it's like to walk into a room where, moments before, two people were arguing. The tension is palpable - in the sudden silence, the stiff smiles, and the hostile body language. A scene immediately emotionally familiar to your readers.

The background is a collage of vintage items. It includes several black and white photographs of people, some of which are partially obscured or faded. There are also documents with handwritten text in cursive. Legible fragments of text include "MARRIAGE", "appertaining:", "opportunities, unto the", "d the said", "Ulla", "of the first part, for", "her self", "covenant, grant, bargain and agree to and with the said party", "t assigns, that at the time of the executing and delivery of", "he above-granted premises in fee simple", "one certain", and "bund".

USE BACKSTORY TO DEEPEN CONTEXT



Backstory

Revealing pieces of a character's past not only makes them appear well-rounded (a complete individual with a past, present and future), but also informs readers of the reasons behind their attitudes, behaviours, and emotional responses in the present.

For example, a character's fear of abandonment may stem from childhood experiences and manifest in the present as insecurity, lack of self-esteem or attachment issues, to varying degrees from the troublesome to the extreme.

Trauma, scars and hidden emotional wounds all influence how a character perceives the world and interacts with it. The effects could be conscious, subconscious, or pushed down and unacknowledged - any of which will have a bearing on that character and those around them.

Past scars do not always mean abuse or neglect in childhood; they could relate to one particular incident or experience, a period of struggle, an unhappy environment, the loss of a friend, family member or partner.



Backstory

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Where possible, weave backstory into the narrative rather than unload it all at once. Or if you need to unload it, either summarize it in several short paragraphs, prioritizing the most pertinent points as they relate to the context of the narrative, or be mindful of where you place it.

If you have lots of backstory to explain, avoid the very early pages of the book where readers haven't had a chance to get to know and connect with your characters yet, and could tune out or switch off altogether. Look for points in your story where readers will already be invested in what's going on, and the backstory will serve to add more layers and deepen that emotional connection.

Techniques: The concept of backstory sounds boring but it doesn't have to be. Look for ways to connect the current scene to the pieces from the past. This makes it feel less like giving information and more like compounding a point. If your point of view is first person or third-person close, remember your character's attitudes and perceptions will colour their recollection of the past, and/or how much they reveal.

A photograph showing the lower halves of four people standing in a row. From left to right: a person in dark trousers and white heels, a person in light-colored trousers and brown shoes, a person in a dark skirt and white heels, and a person in dark trousers and white sneakers. The image is semi-transparent, serving as a background for the text.

BODY LANGUAGE & PHYSICAL REACTIONS



Body language & reactions

Revealing your characters' emotions through their actions, reactions and gestures is a language your readers are fluent in. While we may try our best to hide how we feel, the effect of our emotions on our bodies often makes it impossible. E.g. fear causing sweating or trembling hands, or sadness manifesting as slumped shoulders or heavy eyelids, or have you ever tried stopping a smile when you receive the best news?

Often, it's the subtle gestures that are the most revealing. Small, fleeting facial expressions or movements, such as a flinch at unexpected news, can give away more than your character would like. A twitch of the lips, raised eyebrow, or tightening of the jaw can convey internal conflict that, when observed closely by another character, might kick off another layer of spoken or unspoken tension.

We're all familiar with this; so when you're editing your work, check for areas where you've both shown the character's hidden emotions through body language AND explained it in the narrative. Often, the physical reveals are enough on their own.



Body language & reactions

A pro tip from the editor's desk: When you write the first draft, you'll more than likely reach for the first available body language traits that come to mind, and that's fine. But when you rework the narrative, try to pinpoint the often-used gestures and consider whether there's a more original or unexpected way of portraying your characters' emotions.

This isn't always possible, but it's worth trying because you may find a more subtle gesture that intensifies the emotion of the moment, or one that fits your character's personality better. Remember, some of us react very differently to others.

Techniques: What if your character does the opposite of what you expect? For example, rather than blatantly reveal their anger through folded arms or a shake of the head, might they instead do everything possible to not give your other characters the satisfaction of reading their emotions? Even though, of course, the evidence will be there, in the stiffness of their shoulders, the dull stare, the thumbnail digging into the side of their finger until it draws blood.



CREATE INNER
EMOTIONAL CONFLICT



Emotional conflict

Conflict is not just external, between your characters, but also internal too. There are very few of us, if any, who have everything figured out and are entirely comfortable in our own skins all of the time. Internal conflict is a universal human experience that your readers recognize and empathize with. We are all grappling with something, and this is true for your characters too.

That your characters are contending with complex and conflicting inner emotions serves both to make them authentic and to influence how your story will unfold. Whether your character can overcome their internal conflict could be the basis around which your plot evolves.

For example, a common internal conflict relates to relations with family members. Your character might feel both anger and love at the same time for a parent or sibling or child, creating an emotional push-pull that resonates with readers.

Other conflicts could relate to feelings of obligation, guilt, shame, self-esteem, desire.



Emotional conflict

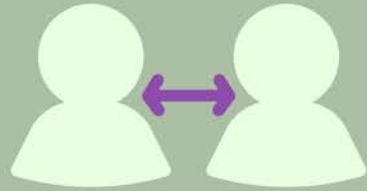
A pro tip from the editor's desk: Keep in mind the attitudes, morals, values, behaviours that pertain to each character specifically. While there are shared commonalities between all humans, no two of us are exactly the same, even if we've shared the same experiences, such as twins. The combination of genetics, environment, upbringing, and life events, influences the issues your character is struggling with. Everything is connected. One character's views on marriage being for life may be quite different from another's, who divorces at the first sign of boredom. In other words, what concerns one character won't necessarily concern another, and that sets up yet more layers of conflict, internal AND external.

Techniques: Place characters in situations where they must choose between two emotionally fraught or seemingly impossible options. Moral dilemmas, or characters forced to act against their values, make for intriguing, unputdownable storylines, because they raise the questions - What would I do in the same situation? How will the character get out of this?



MANIPULATE NARRATIVE DISTANCE



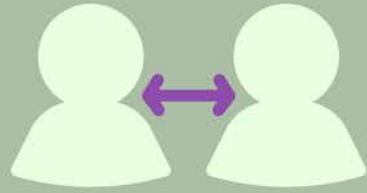


Narrative distance

This relates to point of view in some ways, but narrative distance - how close to a character and their inner life the reader is - can be manipulated to some degree regardless of your chosen point of view. (My article in the Fiction Yogi Resource Hub, [Narrative Distance](#), explains what I mean by this.)

It's your characters (generally) that drive the emotion that makes those essential connections with your readers and keeps them engaged in your story. Thus by manipulating the narrative distance between your reader and your characters, you can steer how you want the reader to feel in any given scene.

When the narrative distance is close, you give the reader direct access to a character's thoughts and make them privy to that character's internal emotional landscape. This usually allows readers to quickly establish a connection with that character, helping them to understand what the character is dealing with internally and empathizing with the "real" issues at hand. But avoid over-relying upon the technique - the ebb and flow of narrative distance can give a more powerful effect.



Narrative distance

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Your characters, more often than not, are the ones in control. Even if your narrator is 1st person, giving your readers a seemingly all-access pass, this doesn't necessarily mean your character will reveal everything they think or feel. They may not even know what they really think or feel (though as the story progresses, the unfolding events may force them to consider it). Narrative distance is fluid, not fixed in the way we perceive the narrator POV to be fixed (1st/2nd/3rd person, etc). It can shift throughout each scene to create the effect you want - bring readers closer, or give them space to draw their own conclusions.

Techniques: Narrative distance is your movie camera. Zoom in or out according to the impact you want your scene to have. In emotionally intense moments, consider whether describing your character's thoughts and feelings will have a stronger or lesser effect than simply allowing your readers to observe what's unfolding. By the stage of the book where your readers know your characters well, silence rather than the inner workings of your character's mind could potentially be more poignant. There's no right or wrong answer. Try both and see which works best.

**KEEP DIALOGUE
NATURAL**





Dialogue

Dialogue is everyone's favourite part of a novel (or is that just me?). It gives the reader a break from visualizing the scenes you are describing, and allows them to just listen in instead. Dialogue reflects not just what characters are thinking, but often what they're feeling too (even if indirectly); through word choice, tone and pace, they convey a range of different emotions as well as their character traits.

Some characters are big talkers, others the strong, silent types. They each speak with a particular cadence, dialect and manner. At times of heightened emotion, such as stress, upset or panic, they may switch this up. Sudden outbursts, long pauses, rambling speech.

More revealing is what is NOT said in dialogue. Your characters, like the rest of us, may avoid directly addressing their feelings, but their emotional state will eke through in the way they speak, e.g. sarcasm, deflection, hesitation. When your readers know more than the characters are letting on and why, this heightens their engagement with your story.



Dialogue

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Where you can, keep dialogue taut, to the point, and only use it when necessary. In real life, dialogue between two people rarely consists of long pieces of speech from one person then the other. It's short, we interrupt each other, talk over each other, forget what we were saying, and usually go off on a tangent, sometimes without saying what we'd intended. Dialogue in fiction needs to be a little more orderly, but only in as much as it is serving a purpose - even if, for example, that purpose is to show one character's frustration at not being heard or understood, or to highlight how two characters' conversations always descend into sniping at one another no matter how hard they try.

Techniques: Dialogue is often accompanied by gestures. Soft smiles and direct eye contact when one character wants to connect with another; snorts, smirks, or roving eyes when they're avoiding something (the topic, their feelings, the person). Additionally, keep in mind characters will change how they speak and what they say according to who they're talking to - truthful, masked, slang, catchphrases, polite, etc.

SUBTEXT IS YOUR MAGIC BULLET





Subtext

Subtext is more or less the grown-up way of saying Show, Don't Tell. And being as we're all grown-ups here (?), let's stick with the former title.

There are two signalling beacons to guide you into developing subtext:

- Characters don't always express what they feel directly;
- Readers want to figure out what's happening for themselves.

Through dialogue and actions, your characters will often be hiding their true selves, or a part of themselves, or some deep-rooted inner conflict that perhaps they've never told a soul about and will do anything to keep that way; it may even be so hidden they don't see it themselves. This could mean, for example, masking their real emotions in public and drowning their sorrows in a bottle when alone.

Secondly, your job as writer is not to tell readers how to feel during your book, but to allow them the space to interpret it in a way that makes sense to them as unique individuals. Which doesn't mean, however, you won't be guiding them in certain directions - it just means you don't need to be explicit about it.



Subtext

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Trust yourself, and trust that your reader will understand what your narrative is implying without you needing to (literally) spell it out. If your beta readers tell you they weren't always following and were confused, then you may need to look again at where you could make your intentions clearer. But until then, as much as possible, trust that your reader will view the scene you're depicting and draw their own conclusions from it. Not trusting leads to overexplaining, which can slow the narrative and dull it; whilst giving your reader work to do will keep them connected, switched on, and engaged.

Techniques: An obvious example of subtext in dialogue is having a character say "I'm fine" while avoiding eye contact. Dialogue is often RIFE with subtext. Consider couples, for example; their history colours everything that's said or not said. Secondly, describe scenes using carefully chosen wording to evoke the desired emotion, rather than flatly explaining (e.g. The day we buried Father a thin mist wet our cheeks and bitter wind stung our throats). Thirdly, allow repressed emotions to simmer below the surface of your storyline, and avoid deflating the tension too soon.

FORESHADOW FOR ANTICIPATION





Foreshadow

Foreshadowing what's about to happen creates anticipation and tension, both of which keep your reader connected to your story and invested in the outcome. Hinting at what's coming down the line could be as simple as an ominous phrase or gesture in a conversation or a seemingly minor event that later takes on deeper emotional significance. It's main purpose is to delay an emotional payoff.

Similar to subtext, foreshadowing gives your readers just enough information for them to begin drawing their own conclusions and second-guessing where the story may lead. This builds curiosity, much needed for keeping readers engaged, particularly when the stakes are high.

The key to foreshadowing is to tease out the emotional stakes so that by the time the moment arrives, readers are well and truly emotionally invested. As it's been compounded throughout the scene (or your story as a whole), by the time the predicted event finally unfolds it carries greater weight, and - more importantly - the payoff for your readers is more satisfying.



Foreshadow

A pro tip from the editor's desk: A good time to thread foreshadowing into your story is once you already know the ending and are then, effectively, working backwards, looking for appropriate points to build that tension. During editing, also be mindful of anything that appears to foreshadow but doesn't lead anywhere. Everything in your story - character, object, chance meeting, conversation - serves a purpose; so if you introduce something that doesn't seem to connect to anything, readers will attach significance to it that may later fail to materialize.

Techniques: Foreshadowing on the macro level could be something like your character training in self-defence, or purchasing a supercar that the salesperson warns them to drive carefully. While on the micro level, you could foreshadow the direction a scene is taking by choosing words that evoke particular sensations (empty, hidden, broken, lost), and/or through your character's wandering imagination (She knew even before she reached the door what sights awaited her beyond it. The kind she would never forget and that would change everything. The two of them, naked and careless, still in the throes of their arrogant deceit).



LET SETTING
AMPLIFY EMOTION



Setting

Setting is not just where your story takes place. It is: the time period and world your characters live in; the country, city, town or village; the environment and climate; their workplace; the places they frequent; the home they own, rent or squat in; the room they spend most of their time in; the people they spend most of their time with.

Your characters' environment profoundly influences who they are and how they live their lives: *The Color Purple* (racial segregation and patriarchal oppression, rural Georgia, early 1900s); *Trainspotting* (urban poverty and drugs, Edinburgh, late 1980s). And it has the power to disrupt or shape who they become: *American Psycho* (Wall Street boom, mid to late 1980s); *The Road* (apocalyptic Southern US, near future).

In effect, setting is one of your characters, and it can have a major impact on your story in multiple ways, as well as reflecting your story's themes and thus building connections with readers. For instance, are your characters in a safe environment that allows them freedom of movement and expression, or are they restricted by laws or the people close to them? Is your setting friend or foe to your characters?



Setting

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Setting sometimes feels like an afterthought in some novels, but it can be used as a very powerful tool, influencing your story in so many ways. Begin by considering how your characters' environment has shaped who they are (upbringing), and whether it can help or hinder them to become who they want to be. What opportunities does their setting allow them, and are there ways it might hold them back (the people or place itself)? Characters changing their setting, i.e. travelling elsewhere, is a useful way to show their desire to change themselves.

Techniques: Aside from influencing who your character is, your story's setting can be used to reinforce a character's emotions. For example, consider the weather as a reflection of their mood, or whether they're in a noisy or quiet environment. Be careful though not to overplay this card or it can become clichéd - gloomy day when character is depressed, or quiet lake when character is thoughtful. Try switching it up instead for an interesting contrast - silent tears whilst waiting in rush-hour traffic gridlock, or a moment of uplifting clarity during a brutal snowstorm.



PACE EMOTIONAL BEATS



Emotional beats

In order to keep your readers engaged in your story, you'll want to vary the emotional intensity throughout. This comes down to pacing, and whilst there are some guidelines you can follow (as noted below), it is also to some degree instinctive.

You'll know yourself that reading a novel is like a roller coaster ride. There are highs and lows in the tension and drama, and this is to keep you on the edge of your seat without forcefully pushing you off it or causing you to nod off. Too much emotion at once would be overwhelming, while too little would make the story feel flat.

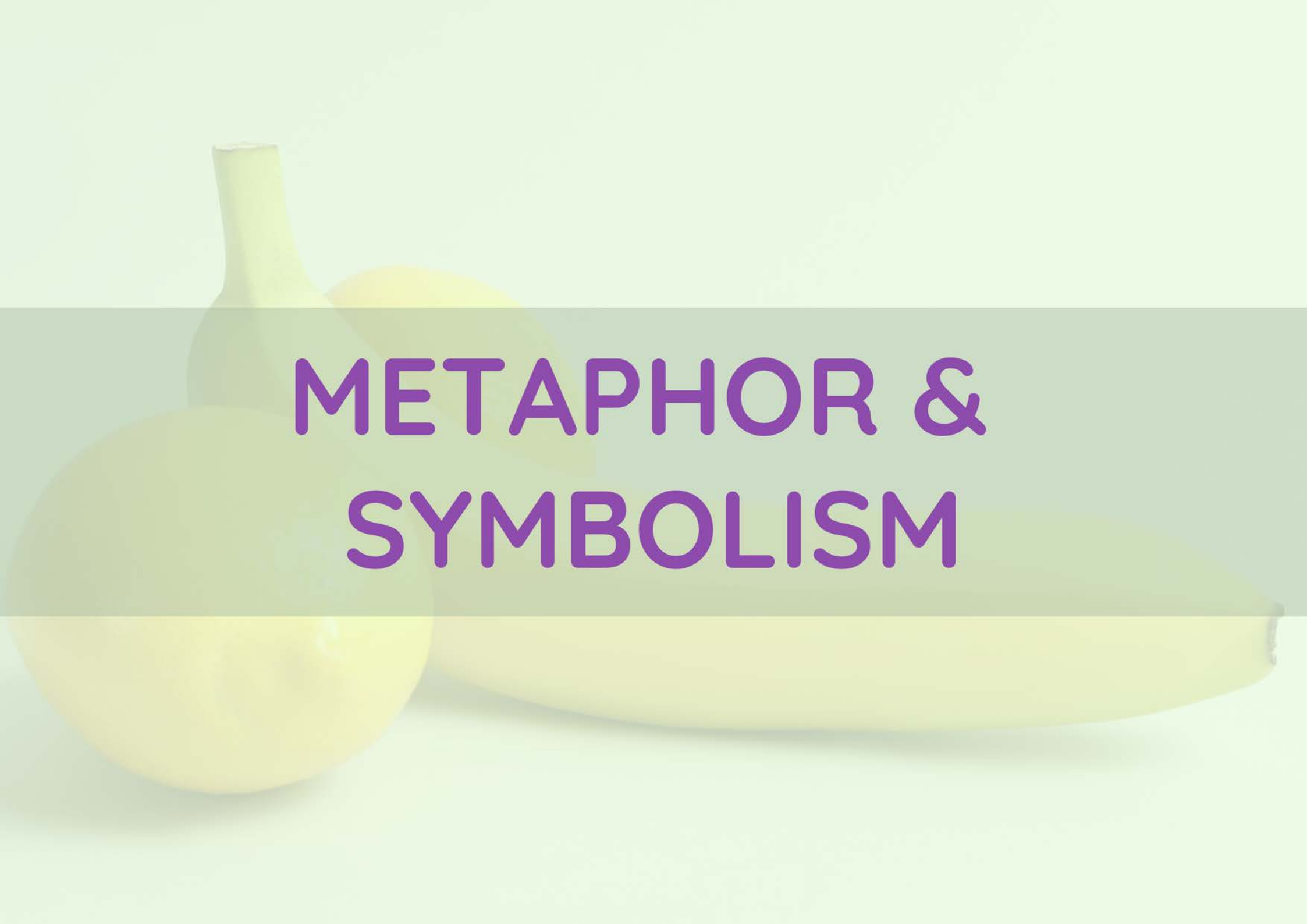
The general guideline is to balance scenes of high emotional intensity with quieter moments of reflection or relief. So, for example, after a major argument between two characters, each may take themselves off to mull over what's just occurred and what this now means for them and their relationship; at the end of which they'll have either reached a moment of clarity or sunk further into despair. These are not just quiet moments for the characters, they also give readers a chance to catch their breath and consider where this leaves the plot.



Emotional beats

A pro tip from the editor's desk: When it comes to emotion in real life, it's rarely all or nothing. When an argument ends, it doesn't get forgotten, the tension isn't banished forever. Things linger - what was said, how it was said, what was really meant by it. So avoid letting the tension you've built in your story get dissipated too quickly. E.g. it's not that your characters have argued, made up, and now all is fine - it's that your characters have argued, made up, and now have to adjust how they treat one another (such as being cautious what they say from now on).

Techniques: On the first draft, you're likely to be guided by your instincts, which is exactly what's needed. But when you're editing, think about your story in terms of major plot, subplots, and scenes, and how the emotional beats can benefit each. In your major plotline, tension will be building incrementally over the course of the book; while your subplots and certainly your individual scenes will be more immediate - for example, two characters who clash heads over just about everything, or one character's unspoken affection for another. See where the tension is needed most and in what capacity, and how you can pace it evenly throughout.

The image features three bright yellow lemons on a plain white background. One lemon is in the foreground on the left, another is slightly behind it to the right, and a third is further back and to the right. A semi-transparent grey horizontal banner is positioned across the middle of the image, serving as a background for the title text.

METAPHOR & SYMBOLISM



METAPHOR & SYMBOLISM

Aside from conveying information in interesting and unique ways, metaphor and symbolism can also be used to communicate more complex or abstract ideas, emotions and themes that in simple language may be less powerful.

Closely related to subtext, metaphorical representations of ideas or emotions give the reader a new way of viewing things as well as the space to comprehend rather than simply being told. Likewise, repeated symbolism layers the message being communicated and further immerses readers in its meaning.

Often the themes communicated through symbolism are universal ones that speak to the human experience, and as such resonate with readers regardless of their culture or background. The symbol itself may be subjective, such as a key or a photograph, and this allows readers to attach their own meaning to it rather than be forced to accept one that doesn't resonate with them.

Importantly, when your readers are able to interpret the metaphor and symbolism for themselves, they form a deeper attachment to, and affection for, your story.



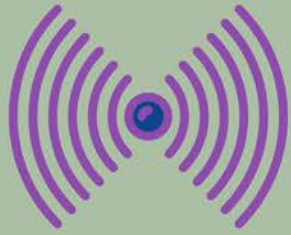
METAPHOR & SYMBOLISM

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Metaphor is that wonderful technique of saying something familiar in a new way. When crafting a metaphor, always bear in mind who your narrator is; for instance, your character-narrator's mood or state of mind will colour their perception and thus their description. For example, in Tom Crewe's *The New Life*, the characters go out into the garden where their post-meal languidity is echoed in the sunlight having “draped itself over the wall”, while the severed stems of the mown grass “bled their scent into the air”.

Techniques: Choose symbols that are easy to remember and encapsulate the themes of the book, such as the ring in *Lord of the Rings*. It doesn't necessarily need to be clear from the outset what the symbol represents; it could be a puzzle piece for the reader to ponder, the significance of which becomes clearer as the story goes on. For metaphors, identify the concept or emotions you're trying to convey (e.g. post-meal languidity), attach that to the scene in view (garden in sunlight), and keep it simple.

Six white dice are arranged in two rows of three. The top row shows a keyhole, a stick figure with a mask, and an airplane. The bottom row shows a bee, a clock face, and a stick figure. A semi-transparent green band with the title text is centered over the dice.

RESONANCE THROUGH THEMES



Themes

Themes are the overarching threads that run through your novel. Often they relate in some way or another to universal emotions that all readers can relate to, such as love, loss, fear, guilt, longing, or justice. Building these resonant themes into the core of your story enables readers to imagine themselves in the same situations as your characters, thus deepening their immersion in your narrative.

Doubling down on the effect, your protagonist's character arc (who they are at the start of your story and who they become by the end) usually aligns with the novel's thematic arc. So for example, a book with a redemption theme may revolve around your protagonist grappling with guilt, regret, and eventually forgiveness.

The themes of your story allow readers to connect with it regardless of how different your characters' lives may be to their own or how strange or rare the plotlines. E.g. themes of overcoming fear and unmasking the monster are what draw readers to horror novels, while justice and revenge over brutality are the key drivers for reading serial killer thrillers. Readers trust your book's theme will reach its natural conclusion.



Themes

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Avoid fretting too much about your story's themes during your first draft. They generally reveal themselves as your story unfolds, and/or you can go back and work them in once your story is completed and you're clearer on what they are (or what it is, if there's only one). By the way, themes don't need to be explicitly stated in your story. Sometimes they are, sometimes not - either way, it's usually obvious by the end of a book what the main themes were (e.g. love overcomes adversity, good wins over evil, family matters more than money).

Techniques: If your story feels unclear or disjointed, go back to what your theme is or might be, and use it to clarify which path the narrative and your characters need to take in order to gradually build on this theme and reach its conclusion. Ways to weave theme into your narrative might be: symbols, imagery and motifs (the diamond in *Titanic*: love, loss, class conflict); your character's journey to self-discovery (*Scrooge*: compassion, redemption); conflicts and resolutions (*The Hunger Games*: societal control, inequality).

END SCENES ON EMOTIONAL NOTES

G O O D B Y E



Scene endings

When you end your scenes or chapters with an unresolved emotional beat, it keeps readers emotionally invested. They'll either be anxious to turn the page and read more, or anxious to finish what they have to do in real life so they can get back to the book.

Enticing scene endings could be an unanswered question, a confrontation, a dawning realization, a decision made, or a quiet moment of inner turmoil. Either way, it stirs something in your reader that gives them pause to think about what they've just learned, and/or makes them eager to see what happens next.

Some scene endings may be dramatic, but they don't all need to be. You just want something that tugs your reader by the sleeve into the next scene. Remember, emotionally intense moments are often followed by rest, recuperation and reflection. Let characters process what they've felt, then let your readers do the same with a scene or chapter break.



Scene endings

A pro tip from the editor's desk: Where is the best place to end your scene? Try different ways. For example, mid-argument when the river's in flood and the rocks are being thrown around; or when one of the stones gets lodged in a narrow spot, interrupts the flow, and one half of the argument storms off. Think about the white space on the page after a scene or chapter ending as the equivalent of a gasped breath, a dramatic pause. Use it to your advantage, and place it where it will have the greatest effect.

Techniques: Dramatic or not, try to end your scenes on something that either moves the plot forward in some way (e.g. a handshake on a much-opposed business deal), or is about to (e.g. a plan made to take back what a character believes they're entitled to). Aside from tense cliffhangers or contemplative reflection and rejuvenation, scene endings may also: reveal new information; introduce ambiguity or move the plot in a new direction; compound the theme or an emotional beat; shift the tone, e.g. from calm to chaos or vice versa.

FINAL WORD

A vintage typewriter sits on a rustic wooden desk. A pair of hands is positioned over the keyboard, ready to type. A sheet of white paper is fed into the typewriter. To the right of the typewriter, there is a small, crumpled piece of white paper and a white ceramic cup. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter, and the text 'FINAL WORD' is prominently displayed in the center in a bold, purple, sans-serif font.



Final Word

So there you have it. We've addressed the vital inner tools you already possess for writing great fiction your readers will connect to and engage with, and also some ways you can thread the essential emotional components through your story to make it truly unputdownable. If you'd like to dig deeper into some of these topics, check out the **Resource Hub** at Fiction Yogi, or drop me a line if there's something you'd like to learn more about that I haven't yet covered.

I hope you've found this guide useful.

Take care & happy writing,

Tina

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