

writing skills

“He who combines the useful and the pleasing wins out by both instructing and delighting the reader. That is the sort of book that will make money for the publisher, cross the seas, and extend the fame of the author.”

Horace, EPISTOLAS AD PISONES DE ARS POETICA, c.19BC

Remember Thomas Edison’s famous adage – “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” In practice things get made – and written – through hard work rather than single flashes of genius. It’s true that writing creatively and imaginatively are often seen as God given talents, but the know-how side of writing can certainly be acquired through learning. And it’s on these aspects of Story craft that WRITING SKILLS focuses. They concern what you might call the ‘hidden plumping’ of a narrative, in that they essentially deal with what’s happening underneath your story.

WRITING SKILLS covers the craft of exposition, the use of language, description and speech patterns, plus practical ways of creating dialogue and sub-text. There are also sections on editing re-drafting.

The Practice and Craft of Writing has thoughts and quotes from professional writers on the writing process, plus some advice for would-be writers starting out. **PAGE 3**

Exposition – What is Exposition and Why is it so Difficult to Write? considers what exposition is and the particular problems it presents to the writer. **PAGE 26**

Exposition – Examples Across History reflects on some historical and contemporary examples of exposition, from Greek theatre to the modern day, including recent cinematic techniques. **PAGE 53**

Exposition – Practical Techniques and Devices considers the various methods a writer can use to get story information across. **PAGE 78**

Exposition – ‘Show Don’t Tell and ‘Suggest Don’t Show’ looks at two key writing maxims concerning the craft of exposition. **PAGE 114**

Language, Metaphor and Description has a selection of thoughts and quotes on language, grammar and description in the craft of story composition. **PAGE 124**

Dialogue and Speech examines techniques around writing and creating dramatic dialogue. **PAGE 136**

Sub-text and Secondary Meanings with some thoughts on the art of sub-text and suggestive writing. **PAGE 163**

Making the Story Make Sense looks at issues such as plausibility, comprehensibility, believability and credibility. **PAGE 180**

Some Warnings, Some Encouragements offers some advice about avoiding the repetitious and the extraneous, and the importance of letting audience figure things out for themselves. **PAGE 194**

Advice from Writers on Research, Rewriting, Revising and Editing with thoughts from professional writers on first drafts, imagining your ideal reader, plus cutting and editing. **PAGE 217**



The Practice and Craft of Writing

"We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master."

Ernest Hemingway, novelist

"Always be yourself... unless you suck."

Joss Whedon, American filmmaker, composer, and comic book writer

"I do not over-intellectualise the production process. I try to keep it simple: Tell the damned story."

Tom Clancy, novelist

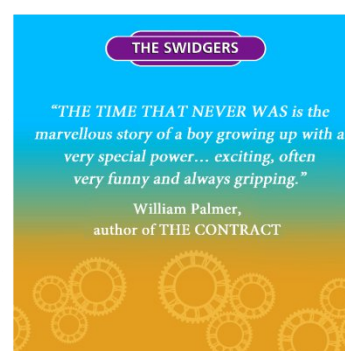
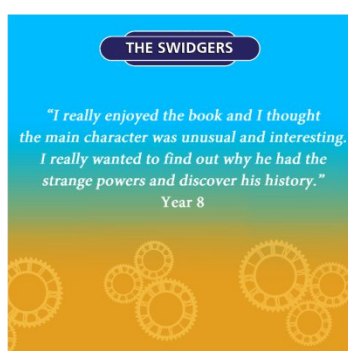
"There are lots of bells and whistles, too – onomatopoeia, incremental repetition, stream-of-consciousness, interior dialogue, changes of verbal tense, the sticky question of back story, theme, pacing... It's all on the table, every bit of it, and you should use anything that improves the quality of your writing and doesn't get in the way of the story."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

Human beings have story believing minds but that doesn't mean that we will believe a story simply because it's a story: it has to be a story that is well told. And that takes craft. But technique needn't be the enemy of the truth. It's about balance.

Ultimately, of course, there is only one rule in storytelling and that is you can do anything as long as you pull it off. Be audacious as you like, break any and every rule in the book, but whatever you do, or whatever way you do it, make sure it works.

There are many thoughts and suggestions and even rules offered here in these WRITING SKILLS chapters, but remember these are only rules that worked for that particular writer. They may not suit you or be appropriate for the story you're putting together. It's also worth saying that if you follow one writer's guidance exclusively, you'll simply end up writing like that writer. Homage is fine, but avoid pure imitation. And that's why in WRITING SKILLS there are so many views offered, and often as not they are contradictory. Do things the way they work for you – as long, of course, as they do work for your project.



Some thoughts on writing and the writing process...

“You become a writer by writing. There is no other way. So do it. Do it more. Do it again. Do it better. Fail. Fail better. I think it’s a good idea, especially when you’re younger, you keep your hand in by writing something every day. So I recommend it, but it’s another one of those recommendations that I myself have been unable to follow.”

Margaret Atwood

“I’m very physical. When I’m writing, I’m playing all the parts; I’m saying the lines out loud, and if I get excited about something – which doesn’t happen very often when I’m writing, but it’s the greatest feeling when it does – I’ll be out of the chair and walking around, and if I’m at home, I’ll find myself two blocks from my house.”

Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

“Write while the heat is in you. ... The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with.”

Henry David Thoreau, writer

“Sometimes, particularly in summers in New York, I have tried to write in shorts or with no shirt on and found myself unable to do so, the reason being, I take it, that writing, even of the most impersonal sort, is for me a divestment, a striptease, even, so that if I start off undressed, I have nowhere to go.”

Alan Bennett, English playwright

“We rarely know where we are going; writing is a discovery.”

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

“The way I write is very much without kind of a goal. I have something I’m interested in and then I decide I’m going to explore it. I don’t know where the characters are going to go, I don’t know what the movie is going to do or what the screenplay is going to do.

For me, that’s the way to keep it alive.”

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director



“When you have committed enough words to paper, you feel you have a spine stiff enough to stand up in the wind. But when you stop writing, you find that’s all you are – a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen.”

Hilary Mantel, historical novelist

“I am a playwright, which is to say that what I have done with most of my time for most for most of my adult life is to sit by myself, talk to myself, and then write the conversation down.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

“Get something – anything – down on paper (or on your computer). Rewriting and editing are easier than writing.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“To me, writing is fun. It doesn’t matter what you’re writing, as long as you can tell a story.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist or understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one’s own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

“Don’t romanticise your ‘vocation.’ You can either write good sentences or you can’t. There is no ‘writer’s lifestyle’. All that matters is what you leave on the page.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“Write every day, line by line, page by page, hour by hour. Do this despite fear. For above all else, beyond imagination and skill, what the world asks of you is courage, courage to risk rejection, ridicule and failure. As you follow the quest for stories told with meaning and beauty, study thoughtfully but write boldly. Then, like the hero of the fable, your dance will dazzle the world.”

Robert McKee

“Some writers claim to extrude a book at an even rate like toothpaste from a tube, or to build a story like a wall, so many feet per day. They sit at their desk and knock off their word quota, then frisk into their leisured evening, preening themselves. This is so alien to me that it might be another trade entirely. Writing lectures or reviews – any kind of non-fiction – seems to me a job like any job: allocate your time, marshal your resources, just get on with it. But fiction makes me the servant of a process that has no clear beginning and end or method of measuring achievement. I don’t write in sequence. I may have a dozen versions of a single scene. I might spend a week threading an image through a story, but

moving the narrative not an inch. A book grows according to a subtle and deep-laid plan. At the end, I see what the plan was."

Hilary Mantel

"To strive with difficulties, and to conquer them, is the highest human felicity."

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

"Once I'd found my groove as a writer, my work ethic became formidable. I work all the time, with weekdays blurring into weekends and days into evenings and I never go on holiday. I could, but I don't because there's always too much work to do and as I love my work, I don't feel as if I'm missing out."

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

"I have written twenty books, and each one is like having a baby. Writing is not easy; some people want to write books but just can't put a story together. I can put together a story that interests both me and my readers."

Jackie Collins, blockbuster novelist

"You can get a lot of work done if you stay with it and are excited and it's play instead of work."

Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

"Busyness, I feel increasingly, is the writer's curse and downfall. You read too much and write too readily, you become cut off from your inner life, from the flow of your own thoughts, and turned far too much towards the outside world."

Hilary Mantel

“Does it all stop tomorrow? Does it all stop tomorrow?’ Writing is spooky. There is no routine of an office to keep you going, only the blank page each morning, and you never know where the words are coming from, those divine words.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“The writing is never what takes the most time. It’s trying to figure what you’re going to put down that fills the days. With anger at your own ineptitude, with frustration that nothing is happening inside your head, with panic that maybe nothing will ever happen inside your head, with blessed little moments that somehow knit together so that you can begin to visualize a scene.”

William Goldman, ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE

“If I waited for perfection, I would never write a word... Aiming for perfection is the kiss of death for fiction writers. Aiming for perfection is basically the equivalent of not writing anything... because trust me, you never will.”

Margaret Atwood, writer



“‘Good story’ means something worth telling that the world wants to hear. Finding this is your lonely task... But the love of a good story, of terrific characters and a world driven by your passion, courage, and creative gifts is still not enough. Your goal must be a good story well told.”

Robert McKee

“To have ideas is paradise – to work them out is hell.”
Maurice Maeterlinck, Nobel Prize Winner in Literature 1911

“The book is the boss.”
Alfred Bester

“It’s hard not to be enthusiastic when you like what you’re doing and I love what I do. I love writing stories, I love coming up with ideas for new projects and I love the people I work with, because I work with great writers and artists and directors and actors.”
Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“Good writing is not an act to excite tolerance because it is good, but anguish because it is not better.”
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Writing is at its best – always, always, always – when it is a kind of inspired play for the writer. I can write in cold blood if I have to, but I like it best when it’s fresh and almost too hot to handle.”
Stephen King, ON WRITING

“The art of writing is the art of applying the seat of your pants to the seat of the chair.”
Sinclair Lewis, American writer and playwright

“A writer should write!”
Samuel Goldwyn shouting down the corridor of the writer’s wing of his studio on not hearing the crack of a single typewriter.

“Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must first be overcome.”
Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“Writing is finally about one thing: going into a room alone and doing it. Putting words on paper that have never been there in quite that way before. And although you are physically by yourself, the haunting Demon never leaves you, that Demon being the knowledge of your own terrible limitations, your hopeless inadequacy, the impossibility of ever getting it right. No matter how diamond-bright your ideas are dancing in your brain, on paper they are earthbound.”

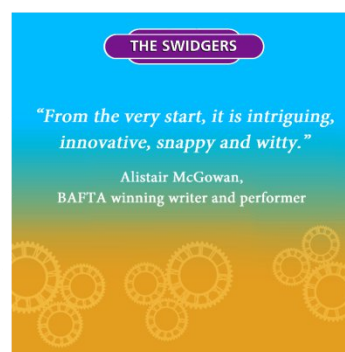
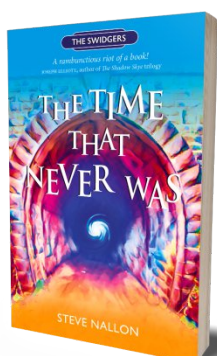
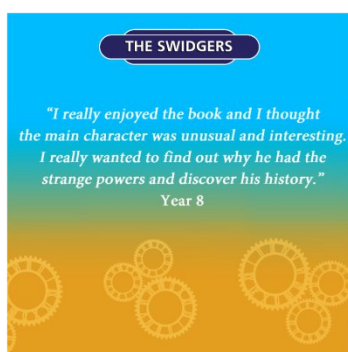
William Goldman, ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE

“When I am writing a book, I’ll go to sleep with a plot hole in my story that I don’t know how to fix. When I wake up, I know. It’s as if it were there all along and I just needed the right sleep to access the answer.”

Tarryn Fisher, South African-born novelist based in Seattle, Washington, United States, known for romance, thriller, and new adult genres.

“Having an idea is like whistling a tune on the steps of Carnegie Hall. The hard part is getting the orchestra to play it inside.”

Robert McKee



Schedule and Environment

“Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

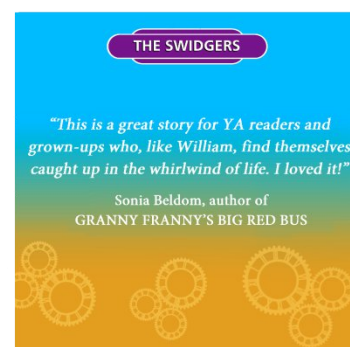
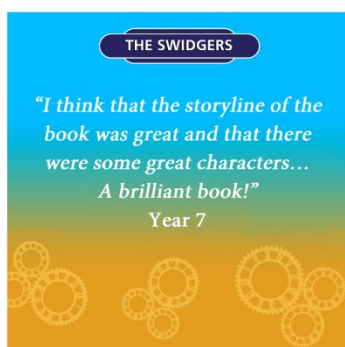
“The right way of doing things is whatever happens to be working for you. Some people have to start at the beginning and go through in order until they get to the end. Other people are making pieces and then arranging them. Some people like to work on, at the page level, at the sentence level, and get that perfect before they move on. There is no set of surefire rules that are going to work for everyone. So you can try these suggestions. If they don’t work for you, the wastepaper basket is your friend.”

Margaret Atwood

“If you get stuck, get away from your desk. Take a walk, take a bath, go to sleep, make a pie, draw, listen to music, meditate, exercise; whatever you do, don’t just stick there scowling at the problem. But don’t make telephone calls or go to a party; if you do, other people’s words will pour in where your lost words should be.

Open a gap for them, create a space. Be patient.”

Hilary Mantel



“Write in any way that works for you: write in a tuxedo or in the shower with a raincoat or in a cave deep in the woods.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Work on a computer that is disconnected from the internet.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“The closed door is your way of telling the world and yourself that you mean business; you have to make a serious commitment to write and intend to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Protect the time and space in which you write. Keep everybody away from it, even the people who are most important to you.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“My own schedule is pretty clear-cut. Mornings belong to whatever is new – the current composition. Afternoons are for naps and letters. Evenings are for reading, family, Red Sox games on TV, and any revisions that just cannot wait. Basically, mornings are my prime writing time.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“No human activity I know of takes more time than writing: it’s highly unusual but anyone to become a successful writer if he cannot put in several hours every day at his typewriter.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“I like to work long hand.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

Housekeeping Notes

“Don’t staple manuscripts,’ the postscript read. ‘Loose pages plus paperclip equal correct way to submit copy.’ This was pretty cold advice, I thought, but useful in its way. I have never stapled a manuscript since.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Once each poem had been redrafted by hand a few times, it was transferred to my computer. I would then print out each revision and revise it by hand before entering my edits back onto the screen. I might go through this process up to forty times.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“Paper isn’t important. It’s the words on them that are important.”

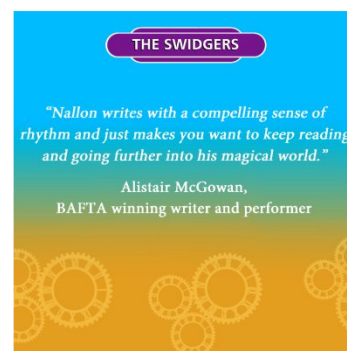
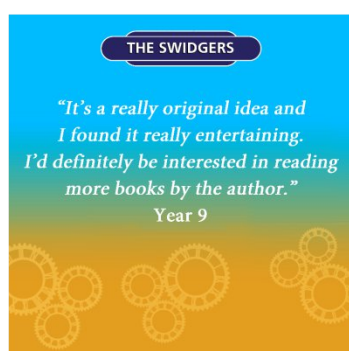
Margaret Atwood

“I write synopses after the book is completed. I can’t write it beforehand, because I don’t know what the book’s about. I invent something for my publisher because he asks for one, but the final book ends up very differently.”

Jackie Collins

“I don’t keep any copies of my books in the house – they go to my mum’s flat. I don’t like them around.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist



Writer's block...

"If you get stuck, get away from your desk. Take a walk, take a bath, go to sleep, make a pie, draw, listen to music, meditate, exercise; whatever you do, don't just stick there scowling at the problem. But don't make telephone calls or go to a party; if you do, other people's words will pour in where your lost words should be.

Open a gap for them, create a space. Be patient."

Hilary Mantel

"The best way of all for dealing with writers block is never to get it."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"The fact is that like every other fiction writer that's ever been born, I am continually haunted by the fear of the well drying up."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"The relation of the unconscious to the conscious is analogous to that of a cultivated Greek slave in service to an overbearing Roman master. If we use this notion as a working premise, we can assume that our unconscious is full of trickiest kinds of resistance. All the writer receives is a sense of dull, edgy resentment. Perhaps the unconscious is not ready to plumb into the material requested. The acute form of this is writer's block."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"There's no such thing as writers block. Just get to a library."

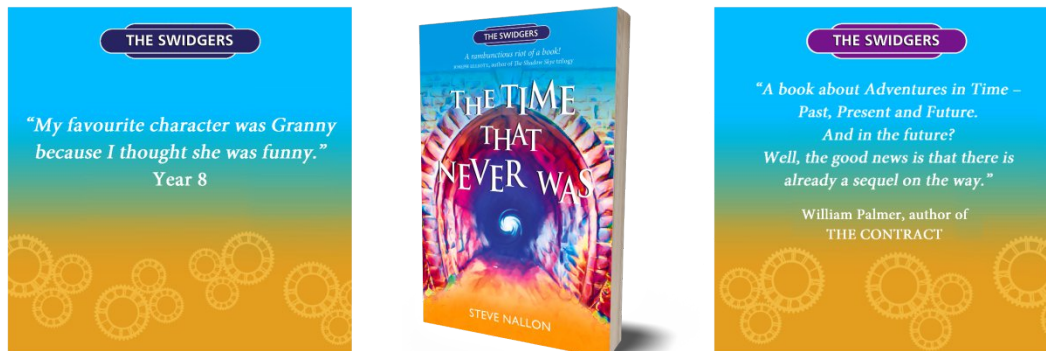
Robert McKee

"Fear of commitment lies behind the fear of writing."

Hilary Mantel

“If you don’t have the initial inspiration, put down your pen, put the pencil back in the jar, switch off the computer and go and dig the garden instead.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



Imagining Your Ideal Reader (or Not)

“Someone – I can’t remember who, for the life of me – once wrote that all novels are really letters aimed at one person. As it happens, I believe this. I think that every novelist has a single ideal reader; that at various points during the composition of the story, the writer is thinking, ‘I wonder what he/she will think when he/she reads this part?’ ... Call the one person you write for Ideal Reader.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Whether you’re on chapter three of your first draft, or you’re almost done with your seventh draft, allow yourself, even for just a few seconds, to imagine people reading your work. Imagine that perfect reader out there somewhere who is desperately searching for a book like yours... Thinking this way won’t hurt your writing. Thinking this way will motivate you even more. Because we’re all ultimately writing for that ideal reader out there. We don’t know who that reader is, might never know at all... And that reader is waiting.”

Margaret Atwood

“In my situation, every time I write a sentence, I’m thinking not only of the people I ended up in college with but my siblings, my family, my school friends, the people from my neighbourhood. I’ve come to realize that this is an advantage, really: it keeps you on your toes.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“Everybody wants to feel that you’re writing to a certain demographic because that’s good business, but I’ve never done that ... I tried to write stories that would interest me. I’d say, what would I like to read?... I don’t think you can do your best work if you’re writing for somebody else, because you never know what that somebody else really thinks or wants.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“Don’t try to guess what it is people want and give it to them. Don’t ask for a show of hands. Try your best to write what you like, what you think your friends would like and what you think your father would like and then cross your fingers... The most valuable thing you have is your own voice.”

Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

“Everybody wants to feel that you’re writing to a certain demographic because that’s good business, but I’ve never done that ... I tried to write stories that would interest me. I’d say, what would I like to read?... I don’t think you can do your best work if you’re writing for somebody else, because you never know what that somebody else really thinks or wants.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“You can’t let the world into your story, but you can let in the ones that matter the most. And you should. Call that one person you write for Ideal Reader. He or she is going to be in your writing room

all the time: in the flesh once you open the door and let the world back in to shine on the bubble of your dream."

Stephen King, ON WRITING



The Eureka! Moment

"If there is one thing I love about writing more than the rest, it's that sudden flash of insight when you see how everything connects."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"Novels go happiest when you discover something you did not know you knew: an insight into one of your more opaque characters, a metaphor that startles you even as you are setting it down, a truth – it certainly feels like a truth – that used to elude you."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"Having completed the script, there is a brief window of maybe a few hours, when you are able to bask in the glow of achievement and before the doubts begin to crowd in."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

The Daily Grind

"I learned about taking pains... I discovered what every good writer knows, that getting down one's exact meaning helps one to discover what one means."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"All writing is discipline, but screenwriting is a drill sergeant."
Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

"A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book; I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character – all that in-between! – those months or years when you have to report to work almost every day."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure."

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

"It's disturbing to read a novelist with a good style when you're in the middle of putting your work together. It's much like taking your car apart and having all the pieces on the floor just as somebody drives by in a Ferrari."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"I learned [from Lennis Dunlap, writer of THE FORMS OF FICTION] a writer must take infinite pains – if he writes one great story in his life, that is better than writing a hundred bad ones – and that that the pains the writer takes must be his own."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Sometimes when you’re writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does not get easier as you get older... Writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You’re alone, and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“I’m sort of a pressure writer. If somebody says, ‘Stan, write something,’ and I have to have it by tomorrow morning, I’ll just sit down and I’ll write it. It always seems to come to me. But I’m better doing a rushed job because if it isn’t something that’s due quickly, I won’t work on it until it becomes almost an emergency and then I’ll do it.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“Writing a novel over two or three years of the hardest work sometimes does the kind of damage to the body that is equal to obliging someone who has never smoked before to consume two or three packs a day for months... Only another writer can know how much damage writing a novel can do to you. It’s an unusual activity to sit out at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. Various kinds of poisons – essences of fatigue – get secreted through your system. As you age, it gets worse.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Beyond imagination and insight, the most important component of talent is perseverance – the will to write and rewrite in pursuit of perfection. Therefore, when inspiration sparks the desire to write, the artist immediately asks: Is this idea so fascinating, so rich in possibility, that I want to spend months, perhaps years, of my life in pursuit of its fulfilment? Is this concept so exciting that I will get up each morning with the hunger to write? Will this inspiration compel me to sacrifice all of life’s other pleasures in my quest to perfect its telling? If the answer is no, find another idea. Talent and time are a

writer's only assets. Why give your life to an idea that's not worth your life?"

Robert McKee

"It is difficult to keep up one's literary standards through the long, slogging reaches of the middle of a book. The early pleasures of conception no longer sustain you; the writer plods along with the lead feet of habit, the dry breath of discipline, and the knowledge that on the other side of the hill, the critics – who also have their talent to express – are waiting."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



General advice from Writers to New or Would-be Writers

"The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it."

Margaret Atwood

“The only advice anybody can give is, if you wanna be a writer, keep writing. And read all you can, read everything.”

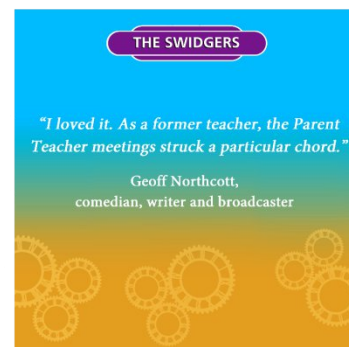
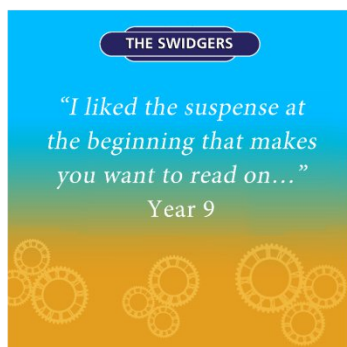
Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“Write a book you’d like to read. If you wouldn’t read it, why would anybody else? Don’t write for a perceived audience or market. It may well have vanished by the time your book’s ready.”

Hilary Mantel

“People say, ‘What advice do you have for people who want to be writers?’ I say, they don’t really need advice, they know they want to be writers, and they’re gonna do it. Those people who know that they really want to do this and are cut out for it, they know it.”

R.L. Stine, American novelist, short story writer, television producer, and screenwriter



“Nobody knows anything... Not one person in the entire motion picture field knows for a certainty what’s going to work. Every time out it’s a guess and, if you’re lucky, an educated one.”

William Goldman, ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE

“If you’re going to write a good book, you have to make mistakes and you have to not be so cautious all the time.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“Do not copy my style! The first rule of writing is write about what you know, not what you think you know. So, think about what you’ve done in your life and write about that.”

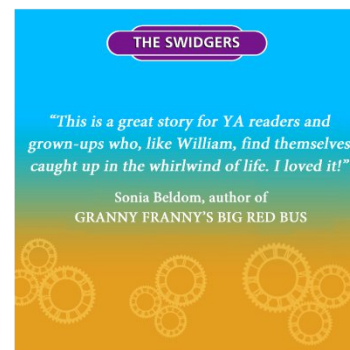
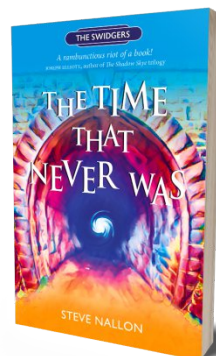
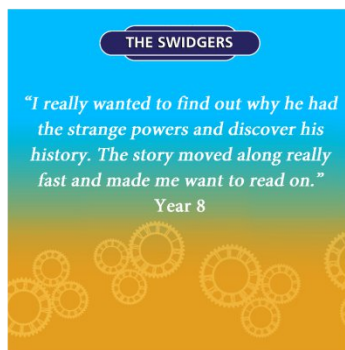
Jackie Collins

“Refusing to accept no for an answer is something I’ve passed on to the younger people I teach, especially those who are so devastated at a single rejection from a publisher, they decide to stop writing. I cite stories of writers who received scores of rejections before landing a publishing deal.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you’re going to be every day from nine ‘til noon or seven ‘til three. If he does know, I assure you that sooner or later he’ll start showing up, chomping his cigar and making his magic.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING



“If you’re going to write a good book, you have to make mistakes and you have to not be so cautious all the time.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“I don’t think the writing life is like deciding you’re going to be a lawyer or a dentist, it’s not that kind of decision. I think it’s something that you already – you’re already on that path before you know it – and you discover it, but I think that if you have to

stand back and say, 'should I be a writer or should I not be a writer?' If you're doing that, then the answer is probably, 'I should not be.'"

Margaret Atwood

"If you want to achieve your dreams, you must follow them, and the best way to follow them is not to think about wanting to be very rich, but to think about doing something that you really want to do."

Jackie Collins

"Don't bend, don't water it down; don't try to make it logical; don't edit your own soul according to fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly."

Franz Kafka

"If you really do want to write, and you're struggling to get started, you're afraid of something. What is that fear? Are you afraid that people will laugh at you? Are you afraid that it won't be any good? Are you afraid that your mother will find out? You know, what is the fear? Identify the fear, look that fear in the face. There are ways of dealing with all of these fears. People have used many ways of dealing with them. Some of them have written under pseudonyms. So if you're afraid your mother will find out, make up another name. Write under that name. If you're afraid that people will laugh at you, just remember, you don't have to show them anything until you're ready. It's only you and the page."

Margaret Atwood

"If you're a serious young writer and find that you're writing a lot, then don't listen to what anybody else says – do you book."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair – the sense that you can never completely put on the page what’s in your mind and heart.

You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed, ready to kick ass and take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it in anyway but lightly. Let me say again: you must not come lightly to the blank page.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Writers always write best about what they most care about. The writer who cares more about philosophy than about anything else (except writing) should study philosophy.”

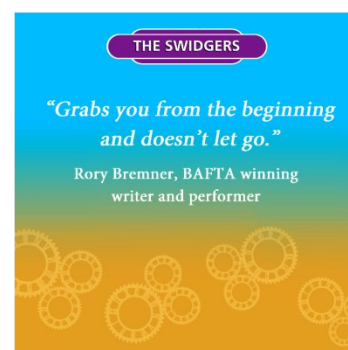
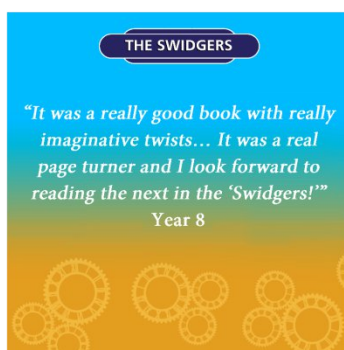
John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Normally, young writers have all the time in the world and they don’t always use it well.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“Keep writing. Get to the end. Don’t allow yourself to abandon the project. You must finish what you write. But what, you ask, if I have a chaotic mess at the end? Celebrate. This is the way it usually is, even for veteran novelists.”

James Scott Bell





Exposition – What is Exposition and Why is it so Difficult to Write?

“Exposition in film is like the exposition in any art form. If you explain the joke’s punch line, the audience might understand it, but they won’t laugh.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

What is Exposition?

At its very basic exposition is a statement of story information. What we are talking about here are the essential facts that are necessary to understand the tale. For example, we need to know who the characters are and their relationships with each other, plus where we are and when we are. We also need to know what the present situation is, usually meaning what has just happened, what is happening right now and what is about to happen very soon.

But there are several problems with exposition. First, it rarely occurs in real life, meaning that people don’t communicate with each other by making ‘statements of story information’, and if they do it’s usually dry and flat, with little emotional or dramatic impact to it.

Second, pure exposition is essentially a static element in that there's no action. In other words, while everything is being explained the plot stands still. But there are ways round these problems.

Exposition isn't easy to write but on the other hand it is the one aspect of writing that is arguably a skill and a craft that can be taught and learnt as opposed to some sort of special talent or mystical gift that floats down from the Muses.

“Information gleaned indirectly by an audience is far more effective.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



“Keep everything in context, and try to have each line doing more than one thing – not just giving exposition but also revealing character and history, etc.”

Richard Bausch, American novelist

The Different Types of Exposition

There are different types of exposition that are worth distinguishing. There's information about the 'now' of the story, that is, the present situation. This story information involves the action that's going on when we join the story, relevant past history (meaning the back story), and finally technical facts and historic

detail that are required to follow the plot. Let's briefly look at each in turn.



To understand what the present situation is the audience/reader requires knowledge of who/what/where/when. This is normally the priority for the writer but not always. The writer may choose to present characters and what they are doing with little explanation, raising curiosity as to who they are. *Show first, tell later*, as it were. In the opening chapter of *THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS* there is little directly presented story information about William, the protagonist. We are not told much about *who* he is, other than he's a young lad – and this is because *what* he is, a *Swidger*, is far more important in the opening action.

Then there is the essential story information about what is happening currently and what is about to happen. Every plot joins the story in the middle of some sort of action or goes on. It won't be the actual drive action that propels the arc of the story but some event or other will usually be in progress. And it's important that what's happening right now is made as clear as possible early on.

Even with just a few facts the audience/reader can often work this out for themselves. For example, an opening scene in a courtroom where we see someone making a plea of 'Not guilty', or maybe we are in a church where there is a wedding in progress, or a large country house with people arriving in cars for the weekend. Setting shows, not tells – and sometimes that's all you need.



Another aspect of exposition is what has happened previously. What we are talking about here in general terms is the back story. However, when story gurus refer to back story, what they are usually thinking of is a traumatic or life changing event or incident which happened in the past and which has a strong bearing on the present. And usually this event occurred long before the point at which we join the story. Many classic stage plays, notably OEDIPUS REX, GHOSTS, THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN, are essentially a dramatic uncovering of back story. But there is also what has just occurred prior to the audience/reader joining the story. And this too forms part of the exposition and ideally it should be established as soon as possible.

Finally there is the sort of exposition which involves historical information and any technical or scientific knowledge that will be required to understand the story. Often with scientific information an expert comes on and explains it all. Usually this expert is quirky or even comic in some way and that can, as it were, sweeten the pill of feeling like you're back in school trying to make sense of some unfathomable aspect of physics or biology. But there are other ways, too. In JURASSIC PARK there was so much to explain about how the dinosaurs had been brought back to life from fossils and so the film makers used a lengthy but entertaining video presentation which John Hammond who created the park had intended to show on in the theatre at Jurassic Park itself. When it comes to historical background, particularly information of which the reader or audience is unlikely to be immediately unaware, filmmakers often prefer to use title-cards as the most efficient way of establishing where we are and which year we are in.

"I'm a huge fan of not doing world-building or exposition. My eyes glaze over when I see it. I've always loved the idea of dropping in on conversations and letting the reader put the puzzle together by hearing characters talk."

Charles Forsman, graphic novelist



“There’s nothing less convincing than characters who spend the first ten minutes telling each other things they obviously must have known... A great unspoken ‘Get on with it!’ forms in the air whilst characters on stage are telling each other for the third time that they are brothers.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Divisions of Knowledge

In any story there is likely to be a division of knowledge, meaning the characters will each have different levels of information as to what is going on. Some characters will be aware of pretty much everything, others, like the reader/audience, will know very little or nothing at all. Getting across important information across when facts are already known to characters is the most difficult sort of exposition to write for the simple reason that people in real life don’t usually go around telling each other about those things that they are already aware of. There are exceptions of course. Characters are people, and people being people, when arguments get heated, often bring up events of the past as weapons in the present. And so an argument is a legitimate way of getting this sort of information across. But not all stories allow for a big row on page one or in the opening scene. And that’s why known information is one of the trickiest aspects of expositional writing.



Next in the division of knowledge there is information that one character knows and another (or others) do not. This sort of exposition can be done by simple question-and-answer, as long as it's not just a ping-pong of Ask-Tell, Ask-Tell, Ask-Tell exchanges. The classic mystery whodunit, for example, involves an investigator essentially asking questions and seeking answers from characters as to the events which led up to the murder. The investigator's job (the story action, if you like) is to then to work out which version of what happened is the truth and which is the lie. The format of any whodunit is basically Question-Answer, Question-Answer, but it's important it's done in a way that keeps our curiosity and attention.

Finally, there is story information that none of the characters know. This is probably the easiest to present, yet it should still be offered in as interesting and as dramatic a way as possible. A classic example of this might be the reading of a will. Think of LAUGHTER IN PARADISE, AT BERTRAM'S HOTEL, AFTER THE FUNERAL and KNIVES OUT. It's true the solicitor in such stories already knows the contents,

but he or she is the only one and often a relatively minor character whose only function in the plot is to read the will.

“Curiosity is one of the most permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer



MRS DRUDGE: (answering the phone) Hello, the drawing-room of lay Muldoon’s country residence one morning in early spring?

From Tom Stoppard’s THE REAL INSPECTOR HOUND

The Problem of Exposition and Why it’s so Important to get Right

As said, the problem with exposition is that it is essentially no more or less than a statement of story information. There’s the problem, because people in real life don’t talk ‘exposition’ – and characters in your script do then it’s likely to jump out as being awkward and clumsy. Further, without context and proper placement, this kind of story information is unlikely in any way to move the plot forward, plus if it comes with no emotional impact, it possibly might not even be noticed. It’s important then to get your exposition across in a subtle and graceful way, and put it in the right

place and with a specific context so that when the information is offered it ideally has some kind of dramatic effect. And none of that is easy.

There's something else worth pointing out here and that is there are those writers who don't even know that exposition is a problem – and that makes it an even bigger problem. If a writer doesn't realise that exposition is a tough nut to crack then they won't bother to try cracking it – and the result will be that their exposition is likely to be hopelessly bad. A further point worth mentioning is that poor or lazy exposition will be very quickly spotted by any sharp-eyed agent, publisher or producer. Such people can sniff out badly written exposition like the proverbial hound dog and this is going to set off alarm bells in their head as to the competence of your work straight from the off. That's why it's essential to get the craft of exposition right from page one.

RADIO: (without preamble, having just been switched on by MRS DRUDGE): 'We interrupt our programme for a special police message.

The search still goes on for the escaped madman who is on the run in Essex.'

MRS DRUDGE: (fear And dismay) Essex!

From Tom Stoppard's THE REAL INSPECTOR HOUND



“A well-placed prop can speak volumes sometimes.”
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Exposition and Narrative Fiction

Since fiction by its nature is narrated – in other words it’s pure ‘tell’ – does the famous rule of ‘*Show, Don’t Tell*’ still apply? A very powerful answer to that lies, in part, in a few lines in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s 1766 treatise LAOCOON; OR, ON THE LIMITS OF PAINTING AND POETRY:

I find that Homer paints nothing but progressive actions. All bodies, all separate objects, are painted only as they take part in such actions, and generally with a single touch. No wonder, then, that artists find in Homer’s pictures little or nothing to their purpose, and that their only harvest is where the narration brings together in a space favourable to art a number of beautiful shapes in graceful attitudes, however little the poet himself may have painted shapes, attitudes, or space.

Lessing’s influential essay is basically saying that many of Homer’s descriptions of people and events are difficult for a painter because they are rarely static, for Homer’s descriptive story world usually comes with action. *Doing*, in other words. And *doing* in Greek is ‘*drama*’. And that’s why visual artists have to wait, as it were, for

those parts of Homer's narrative that are purely pictorial in order to paint them.

An example of Homer's 'progressive actions' can be seen in his descriptions of armour. In Homer, armour is never described as standing still on a stone floor. No, in Homer armour is put on piece by piece, and it's *the action of putting on the armour* which is the focus.



And Lessing's point about descriptive action applies equally to exposition. It's not a character's wedding ring that should be observed but rather how the character plays with that rings. Knowledge that the character is married comes with the action, and maybe even an attitude to that marriage, but because there is 'doing' it doesn't feel like heavy handed exposition. In other words, it's classic *Show, Don't Tell*.

Incidentally, a more up to date example of showing armour through progressive action can be found in the action thriller IN THE LINE OF FIRE. In the movie, Frank Horrigan and Lilly Raines are CIA operatives who begin an affair. As they make their way to the bed for

the first time they remove their clothes – and as they do, weapons and guns of all kinds drop to the floor. It's funny, but also, in its one way, it's description through action that is not that dissimilar to Homer's expositional technique.

“Exposition is awkward to present because it rarely occurs in real life. Exposition, after all, is telling and drama is showing – form and function are fundamentally at odds.”

John Yorke in INTO THE WOOS



“Back story is all the stuff that happened before your tale began but which has an impact on the front story. Back story helps define character and established motivation. I think it’s important to get the back story in as quickly as possible, but it’s also important to do it with some grace.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

Exposition and the Early Presentation of Back Story

Back story, as said, is a particular type of exposition and it is concerned with the character's past and can often be the key to the heart of the drama at the story's moment of climax. However, the revelation of back story need not always be withheld till the end as in OEDIPUS REX or GHOSTS. Back story can be present early in the narrative as a kind of prologue in order to give the reader or

audience an insight into the nature and psychology of the protagonist. And usually this is a disturbed and haunted psychology, which is why, in story terms, this type of back story is often referred to as 'The Ghost' that gives rise to the problem/need of the character. Examples of what you might call 'the trauma back story' can be found in movies such as VERTIGO, CLIFFHANGER and MERCURY RISING. The psychological problem of the protagonist occasionally resurfaces as the story goes on and sometimes that is presented in the form of a 'mind flash', as with the shooting of the young lad in MERCURY RISING which the hero FBI agent, Art Jefferies (Bruce Willis), was unable to prevent. The on-going relevance of this shooting in MERCURY RISING is that Art Jefferies is now protecting a vulnerable autistic boy from a killer who seeks his death. The implication of the 'mind flash' is that psychologically Art could not cope with allowing another boy to be shot and that by making sure the autistic boy stays alive Art may find some sort of redemption for his previous failure.

“Exposition has legitimate uses. It’s the most efficient way to summarise background information, including necessary information about a character’s history. It can set the stage well for a major dramatised event.”

Nancy Kress



‘Ars est celare artem’ – ‘The true art is to conceal art.’

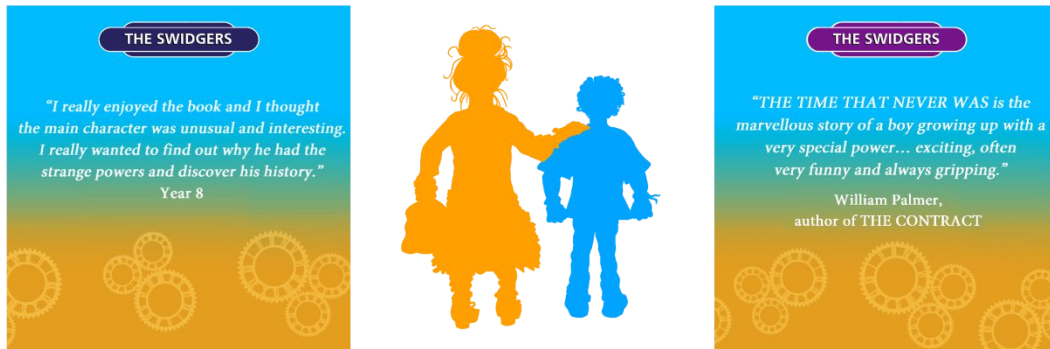
An old Latin maxim

Exposition Rules: ‘The Don’ts’

There are quite a few ‘Don’ts’ when it comes to exposition and they are all worth a mention.

Don’t ever have people say something to someone which that someone already knows.

The classic example of this is when a husband and wife suddenly begin informing each other of basic facts known to both – “How long have we been married, Jerry? It’s twenty-five years now!” Even as a question it’s ham-fisted. That said, if a couple are having a row then bringing up behaviour or events from the past can be a dramatic way of getting in story information. A brilliant of this can be found in the play (and later movie) WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? by Edward Albee, where Martha goes on and on about her husband George’s failed career at his university. Certain people, like the proverbial elephant, never forget – or more specifically never allow you to forget. And Martha is definitely one of them.



Don't ever give your lead or protagonist the job of exposition.

Humphrey Bogart, if he ever found exposition in any of his dialogue, would immediately request that this information be given to another character to say. He was a movie star and movie stars don't do exposition.

Don't include anything the audience or reader can reasonable assume or deduce for themselves.

Michael in THE GODFATHER is dressed in an army uniform, and so it's reasonable to assume he's a soldier or was. That said, the fact he's been decorated as a brave hero does need to be established and this turns out to be a key part of his character. Although Michael is the youngest brother, when the time comes for him to protect his father and revenge his attempted assassination, it's important that we the audience already know of his fighting and combat capabilities in a crisis situation. And his army service history does that. Further, it shows his leadership qualities and these too will prove essential when he takes over from his father as the new head of the mafia family.

Never have a character who, without prior justification, suddenly has knowledge beyond that which is credible for that character.

To borrow the words of Polonius, “To thine own self be true.” It’s not, however, that unusual to hear characters in dramas suddenly spouting on about some scientific fact or other, which, up until that moment, they had shown zero interest in or knowledge of. Then comes the get-out line, “I watched a documentary on quantum physics on television last week.” This method of getting across some technical or scientific expositional information is clumsy and always leaps out as cack-handed writing.

Never have people talk in a manner that they would never do in real life.

Characters in exposition mode often stop speaking in a conversational manner and instead suddenly sound like a footnote or an annotation. This type of clunky manner of talking is cleverly parodied in Tom Stoppard’s *REAL INSPECTOR HOUND*, where the housekeeper, Mrs. Drudge, picks up the phone and says, “Hello. The drawing room of Lady Muldoom’s country residence, one morning in early spring?” And fans of Victoria Wood’s *ACORN ANTIQUES* will remember similarly unnatural imparting of information in Wood’s very funny parody of daytime soaps. Lopakhin’s long speech in *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* could perhaps be said to be overly expositional in

places – a bit ‘on-the-nose’ would be the theatre expression for this kind of writing – but at least the anecdotal nature of what he is saying does lighten some of the weight of the historical information.



Don't tell, always show.

This rule comes up in every story guru's book or writing class. And yet sometimes simply telling may be the most efficient and indeed the only way to get essential information across. Take the opening of Michael Frayn's COPENHAGEN. COPENHAGEN is based on an event which occurred in Copenhagen in 1941, when two physicists, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, met. The play features both men, plus Margrethe Bohr, the wife of Niels Bohr. The setting has no time or space, as the characters are essentially spirits of memory. However, there is an enormous amount of information, both scientific and historical, to get across. And in the opening scene there is little attempt to gradually bring it in or cleverly 'show' it. The facts are presented plainly and starkly. Frayn is a fine writer and he

may well have considered other possibilities, but the simple fact was that there was probably no way of getting the exposition out there other than early and direct statements of information. The play itself is ultimately about what might have been, and the explored possibilities are presented in a dramatic and engaging manner, but for that to happen we first need to know as soon and as efficiently as possible who people are, what they did and the science involved. And so Frayn no doubt concluded that 'tell' was indeed the only way that could be done.

"Ideally, they [the audience] shouldn't need to have bought a programme anyway. Apart from telling you the real names of the actors involved, a programme is there to enhance a play, not explain it. I always detect a certain lack of confidence when I open one which contains a glossary or a detailed explanation. If essential information is not in the play itself, we're in a certain amount of trouble."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



“Important information should always be conveyed at least twice... don’t risk some audience member unexpectedly coughing over it so nobody hears.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Exposition Rules: ‘The Do-s’

Exposition is a bit like plumbing, you want it to work, and it’s essential it does, but you certainly don’t want it obtrusively in view and so noisy that guests can’t but miss it gurgling away all the time. The trick with plumbing, as with exposition, is to hide it, or at least disguise it in some way. The point then is that when exposition is done well, like plumbing, the water should flow all round the house but no one should notice the pipe work.

Anyway, to help that disguise and sugar of the pill of story information, here are a few of the *Do-s* of the exposition.

Do dramatise.

People always say dramatise your exposition, but what does that mean in practice? John York in his excellent book INTO THE WOODS quotes from the first episode of CARDIAC ARREST by Jed Mercurio (writing then as John MacUre). News of a loved one’s death needs to be passed on to relatives by a doctor. In the scene, Mercurio had it that it was a young doctor, terrified of breaking such bad news, who was given the task. John Yorke says that Mercurio understood that if you disguise exposition with ‘emotional overlay’,

as Mercurio put it himself, then it is rendered undetectable. “The emotional impact,” writes York, “renders the exposition invisible.” What ‘dramatise’ then means in practice is, one, give the exposition a specific premise and context, and, two, have it imparted by a character with a particular trait, weakness or attribute. The context in Yorke’s example is that it’s an inexperienced doctor who he doesn’t want to do what he must do. And the actor who played that role would have certainly thanked Jed Mercurio for that because such a situation would have given them something to act.

Of course it doesn’t have to be distressing information that is the context or reluctance that is the weakness. There are many situational and character premises to choose from. Perhaps the information being given is keenly desired and so the receiver wants it told more quickly. Or maybe it’s the opposite, and the hearer refuses to listen and so the teller has to make her. Or perhaps there are two people passing on information and both want to be the first to tell it. Whatever the situation, injecting conflict or upping the stakes in some way makes it dramatic. So, *Do Dramatise*.

Do keep it moving.

Exposition is at its most obvious when characters are just sitting around talking without any movement or doing whatsoever. If it has to be a relatively static scene, the very least a writer can do is give the characters some sort of physical action to offer some sense of

change. Even just standing up helps. Remember the Mexican wave scene in *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY*? The two men are at the game talking away about relationships and what has happened in their lives, but every so often there is a Mexican wave – and they go with it. The up and down breaks up the static nature of the scene and is quite funny too because the two guys keep standing up and waving more from habit than any sense of enthusiasm.

Do withhold until necessary.

Not all expositional details are required at once. In fact it is often better to wait until the right moment before revealing certain details. Besides, withholding information creates interest and curiosity. Placement and timing is what matters.



Do reveal key information if by not doing so causes confusion.

Yes, curiosity is a good thing, but at the other end of the story information spectrum is incomprehension. A certain amount of puzzlement is fine, that can keep up interest, but only to a certain point or length of time. Confusion can eventually become

bewilderment and in turn that can lead to frustration and annoyance. And when that happens you are likely to lose your audience or reader.

Do spread and do place.

It's important to say here that exposition is not just an opening scene issue or problem, for exposition is story information that should run throughout your tale. So spread it and, more importantly, carefully place it at the point of optimum dramatic impact. Arthur Miller's *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* is an excellent example of both. Miller's dramatic tutor Kenneth Rowe taught him that a play involves "the past coming to life in the present and creating drama." And Willie Loman's 'past' in this context is pure exposition, but it's placement throughout the drama that is the key to why *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* works so well. The play builds to the big revelation as to why his sons have rejected him. And it is this that, at least in part, leads to Willy Loman's crisis decision to take his own life.

Do 'salt' your expositional information.

Sometimes expositional information needs to be repeated in different places and different ways. 'Salting', as Alan Ayckbourn calls it in his book *THE CRAFT ART OF PLAYMAKING*. Speaking from a practical point of view, Ayckbourn observes that his plays are written for the theatre and in the theatre people cough and sneeze and worse. You don't want sudden audience noise preventing everyone

else from hearing a key bit of information – and that’s why, argues Ayckbourn, it’s important to ‘salt’ your exposition, meaning, spread and repeat any key information in different places in the script.

Ayckbourn points out too that the human brain doesn’t take everything in all at one go. People become distracted or only half listen. And so for that reason as well it’s essential to ‘salt’ your story information across a scene.



Do show.

Visuals can often do the job of telling. Think costume. Think setting. Think props. All these can do much of the heavy lifting of exposition. For example, someone is leaving an office building early one morning as everyone else is coming in. The person exiting is carrying a cardboard box containing photographs and a few mementoes, plus a plant in a pot. The people who are entering the building look in the opposite direction and sigh, but there’s one who as he passes the man leaving has a big smile on his face and isn’t frightened of showing it. So what has happened here? We can make a reasonable assumption that the person with the cardboard box has

been called in early and then fired. Of course he could just be taking the plant outside for some sunshine, but probably not. Also, we can take it that the people coming in to work are embarrassed that he has been fired, but there's one exception and he is pleased by what has happened. And all this from an image that allows the reasoning of the audience to work things out for themselves.

“An old stagecraft axiom states: ‘Tell every important factor three times to the audience if you want to be sure they understand it.’ Duplication also may be used to reminders of information which was given to us previously. The audience is liable to forget facts even though they may have been clearly established at the beginning. If these facts are important enough, it may be advisable to bring them back or remind the audience of these facts throughout the picture... Of course, duplication can also become a dangerous instrument. If a man comes from the street dripping wet and somebody asks, ‘Is it raining outside?’ duplication becomes idiocy.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



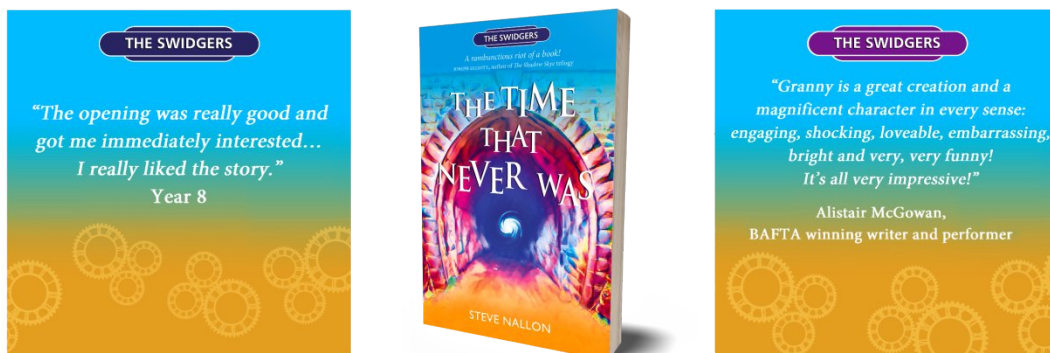
“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve

o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously."

The opening of DAVID COPPERFIELD by Charles Dickens

Exposition and the Narrative Fiction

It should be acknowledged that the majority of the examples in these Exposition chapters come mainly from theatre and cinema rather than narrative fiction. The point here is that whether it's a character narrator or a third person narration, the fiction writer can tell you very directly where we are, the time period we are in, plus who people are. The style and attitude may change writer to writer – compare Charles Dickens to J.J. Salinger – but the medium itself does not. But that sort of direct telling usually isn't possible in a movie or play, or even if it is via a voice over, such methods tends to be frowned upon.



Terry Pratchett makes the observation that “plot exposition that can be gently wound out by the authorial voice and internal monologue of a character in the length of a page has to be delivered

in a matter of seconds on the stage.” His point is that the stage, unlike the written word, is a restricted medium in terms of time. And when he describes his sort of storytelling as that which is “gently wound out by the authorial voice and internal monologue of a character” you can make the reasonable assumption that the written word is his preferred medium. He’s a prose writer, after all. And exceptionally good at it.

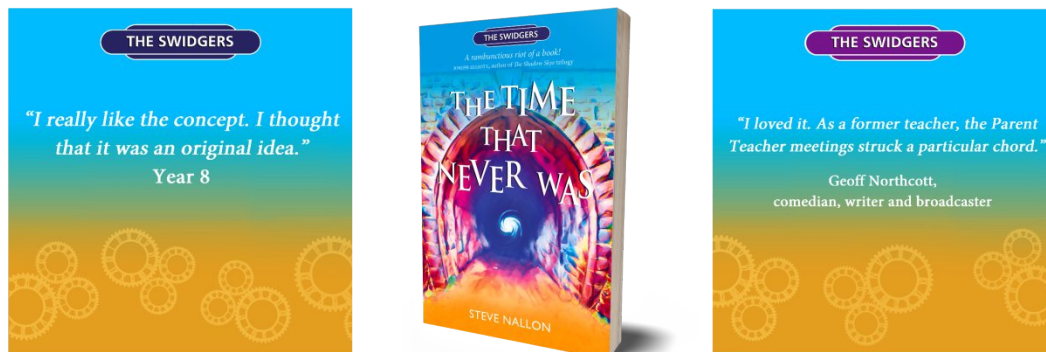


But all this is not to say that the guidelines, techniques and devices concerning exposition that are discussed in these Exposition chapters aren’t just as applicable to the novel as they are to a stage drama or movie. Dramatisation, ‘salting’, the performative setting, the arrival of the outsider and all the other suggestions that are discussed in the following chapters are expositional methods that can be put to use in the narrative fiction form.

“If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of cr*p, but I don’t feel

like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have two haemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them."

From the opening of THE CATCHER IN THE RYE by J.D. Salinger





Exposition: Examples Across History

“Shakespeare wasn’t skilled at exposition, and didn’t get much better at it as his career went on, which is a comfort to the rest of us.”

David Edgar in HOW PLAYS WORK

The Prologue

This is the opening of Euripides’s ALECESTIS written in the sixth century AD:

Hail, House of Admetus, where I had to eat bread with the poor, though I am a god, Apollo. Zeus is to blame for this; he killed my son, Asclepius, striking him in the heart with lightning. I got mad and I got even: I killed the Cyclopes, makers of Zeus’ fire; then my father made me serve a mortal man as his slave, to punish me. So I came to this land and tended sheep for my host and up to now I have been the protector of this house. Yes, being holy myself, I found him holy, the son of Pheres; I saved his life, by tricking the Fates; for my sake the goddesses agreed to let Admetus escape his present death, if he found a substitute to give the gods below. He made requests, he asked them all, his nearest and dearest, his father and the old woman who gave him birth, his mother, but he found not a one save his wife who was willing to give up her life and the sun’s rays that here shine down.

Now in this house she lies, needing a helping hand even to stand up. Her last gasp cannot be far off. Today is the day the Fates have destined she must die and leave this world. But as for me, to avoid the filth of death under the roof, I am leaving this house, with fond memories. And I already see Death coming 'round, priest of the deceased, who is going to take her down to the halls of Hades. He is, as ever, punctual, keeping track of the day she has to die.

Euripides is said to have been the inventor of this kind of expositional prologue. A character comes on and basically says who people are, what occurred in the past that got us to where we are now, plus what we can expect to happen next. Often this character is a God, as here with Apollo, or with Poseidon in *TROJAN WOMEN* and Aphrodite in *HIPPOLYTUS*, but it can be another type of dramatic persona too, such as the ghost of Polydorus in *HECUBA* or an ordinary farmer in *ELECTRA*. Sometimes this character leaves and never comes back, or occasionally they become a character in the drama itself, as with the play *IPHIGENIA IN TAURUS*, where the prologue is presented by Iphigenia herself.

The prologue's function in ancient times was essentially to offer the Greek audience a quick reminder of the myth, legend or history that was about to be explored in the play, plus, as said, where we are in that particular story when the drama starts. The comedy writer Aristophanes did something similar, except his opening characters tend to be lowly and funny, and much more interested in the present

state of Athens than the past. And Aristophanes opening prologue then is more like a stand-up comedy routine in that it usually includes observations on current state of affairs and how they can be tackled.

Of course, prologues are still used today, for example, in BEAUTY AND THE BEAST and EDWARD SCISSORHANDS. Both are fairy tales of sort, and a prologue fits that form well, for a prologue by its very nature acknowledges that what it is introducing is a story. But the use of a prologue to get round the problem of exposition may not be appropriate for all stories, forms and genres. It's important to consider then exactly what is best for your particular kind of story. But there is at least one thing that can certainly be said in favour of the prologue, and that is it certainly saves the actors a lot of clumsy dialogue.

LURCIO: Yes, well, here we go. 'The Prologue. Now it came to pass...'

SENNA THE SOUTHSAYER: Oh woe! Oh woe is me!

Frankie Howard beginning UP POMPEII! each week with The Prologue only for it then to be interrupted



***PROSPERO: My brother and thy uncle, call'd Antonio –
I pray thee, mark me – that a brother should
Be so perfidious! – he whom next thyself
Of all the world I loved and to him put
The manage of my state; as at that time
Through all the signories it was the first
And Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed
In dignity, and for the liberal arts
Without a parallel; those being all my study,
The government I cast upon my brother
And to my state grew stranger, being transported
And rapt in secret studies. Thy false uncle – me
Dost thou attend me?***

MIRANDA: Sir, most heedfully

From THE TEMPEST (1610) by William Shakespeare

Shakespeare

Let's now jump several centuries, to the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare in his early writing life used the device of the prologue, notably in ROMEO AND JULIET in 1594 (which offered foreshadowing as well as setting the scene), but this opening exchange in Shakespeare's HAMLET presented a few years later in 1601 takes a very different approach:

BERNARDO: Who's there?

FRANCISCO: Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

BERNARDO: Long live the king!

FRANCISCO: Bernardo?

BERNARDO: He.

FRANCISCO: You come most carefully upon your hour.

BERNARDO: 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed,
Francisco.

FRANCISCO: For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.

BERNARDO: Have you had quiet guard?

FRANCISCO: Not a mouse stirring.

BERNARDO: Well, good night.

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

FRANCISCO: I think I hear them.

[Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS]

FRANCISCO: Stand, ho! Who's there?

HORATIO: Friends to this ground.

MARCELLUS: And liegemen to the Dane.

The Elizabethan stage in Shakespeare's time had no set in the sense of painted scenery or wheeled-on beds. Then you have to consider that the plays were performed in the open air during the day. The afternoon, in fact. And because of all this it was important to set the scene both in terms of place and time as soon as the actors came on. The opening scenes of many Shakespeare dramas therefore read like a radio play, in the sense that the first few lines need to establish not only the who and the what, but also the where and then when.

From the first two lines of *HAMLET*, Shakespeare's audience would have worked out that what we have here are two soldiers on guard duty ("Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself" is basically

Francisco saying – ‘*No, you tell me who you are, for I’m the one on guard duty*’) and the mention of the King suggests the location is probably some sort of castle or royal residence. A few lines later we also know that it is after twelve midnight and the weather is bitterly cold. Francisco then says that he is “sick at heart”, but not why. The exchange “Have you had quiet guard?” and “Not a mouse stirring” could, with two good actors, suggest that there is much relief in how calm and uneventful a night it has been, and so give a sense to the audience that something more than a mouse was expected. Anyway, Francisco and Bernardo then go on to mention Horatio and Marcellus, who now named, duly enter on cue and give us additional information as to which country we are in:

HORATIO: Friends to this ground.

MARCELLUS: And liegemen to the Dane.

FRANCISCO: Give you good night.

MARCELLUS: O Farewell, honest soldier:
Who hath relieved you?

FRANCISCO: BERNARDO: has my place.
Give you good night. [*Exits*].

MARCELLUS: Holla! Bernardo!

BERNARDO: Say,
What, is Horatio there?

HORATIO: A piece of him.

BERNARDO: Welcome, Horatio: welcome, good Marcellus.

MARCELLUS: What, has this thing appear’d again to-night?

BERNARDO: I have seen nothing.

MARCELLUS: Horatio says ‘tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us:

Therefore I have entreated him along
With us to watch the minutes of this night;
That if again this apparition come,
He may approve our eyes and speak to it.

HORATIO: Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.

BERNARDO: Sit down awhile;
And let us once again assail your ears,
That are so fortified against our story
What we have two nights seen.

HORATIO: Well, sit we down,
And let us hear Bernardo speak of this.

BERNARDO: Last night of all,
When yond same star that's westward from the pole
Had made his course to illume that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one, –

[Enter Ghost]

MARCELLUS: Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes
again!

BERNARDO: In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

MARCELLUS: Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.

BERNARDO: Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio.

HORATIO Most like: it harrows me with fear and wonder.

BERNARDO: It would be spoke to.

MARCELLUS: Question it, Horatio.

HORATIO: What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form

In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? by heaven I charge thee, speak!

MARCELLUS: It is offended.

BERNARDO: See, it stalks away!

HORATIO: Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!

MARCELLUS: 'Tis gone, and will not answer.

BERNARDO: How now, Horatio! you tremble and look pale:
Is not this something more than fantasy?

What think you on't?

HORATIO: Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes.

MARCELLUS: Is it not like the king?

HORATIO: As thou art to thyself:
Such was the very armour he had on
When he the ambitious Norway combated;
So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parle,
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
'Tis strange.

'Tis strange indeed, but gripping and exciting too!

And yet, when you look at it closely, the dialogue in this scene is pretty much pure exposition. You hardly notice it, for Shakespeare has dramatised the story information and made into a suspenseful thriller.



There's a couple of lines in these exchanges that are worth looking at in more detail. First, the use of the word 'thing' in Marcellus's line "What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?" Curiosity is immediately aroused – *what could it be?* A few lines later we're told it's an 'apparition'. Now we're aware what it is – a spirit

of some sort – but not whose spirit. Soon the ghost appears and then we're told it looks 'like the King that's dead'. A key story fact but it's done in such a way that gets you hooked.

And there are other important bits of story information that are dropped in throughout these exchanges. We discover Horatio is a scholar, that we're in Denmark, that the King was a brave warrior and that when he was alive he defeated Norway battle. And all this turns out to be essential information if you are to understand what's goes on in the story as the plot progresses.

Perhaps then David Edgar was being a little unfair to say that Shakespeare wasn't particularly skilled at exposition. Certainly Prospero's speech early in the first act of *THE TEMPEST* about people we've never met or seen so far, is a bit clunky, and so it's no wonder that Prospero has to ask Miranda if she's been paying attention. However, the scene opening of *HAMLET* is without doubt an example of the craft of dramatic exposition at its very best.

HORATIO: My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

HAMLET: I prithee do not mock me, fellow student,

I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

HORATIO: Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

HAMLET: Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral bak'd-meats

Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

From William Shakespeare's *HAMLET*



***The ‘well-made play’.* Noun. Written in a formulaic manner which aims at neatness of plot and foregrounding of dramatic incident rather than naturalism, depth of characterization, intellectual substance, etc.**

The Oxford English Dictionary

Nineteenth Century Theatre

Let’s jump another couple of hundred years to the Victorian era, where theatres are now in enclosed dark spaces, their stages have furniture and scenery, and there are footlights to illuminate the stage. And what all this means, of course, is that as soon as the curtain rises the audience can see where the drama is set and even what time of day it is.

The nineteenth century was the theatrical era that became known for the ‘well-made play’ and the rise of realism. But the dramatist still had to introduce the *dramatis personae* and say who they were and what they did. Typically in the dramas of writers such as Henrik Ibsen and Harley Granville Baker, two characters would enter – let’s call them Anthony and Brenton – and there would be an opening scene where they would discuss a third character who they were about to meet, whom we shall call Clifford. Clifford (or C) would

then enter and Brenton (or B) would then leave, and C and A would talk about character B.



And it's worth pointing out that even before A, B or C entered there might have been two maids or a maid and a butler found on stage as the curtain went up discussing the 'master of the house' and who he was expected that morning or that afternoon or that night. This exchange usually happened during some table-dusting – and in the theatre 'table-dusting' became the shorthand term for this sort of expositional stagecraft. An example of table-dusting can be found in Ibsen's *THE WILD DUCK* (1884), where a gossiping servant talks to a fellow servant about a dinner taking place next door:

PETTERSEN, in livery, and JENSEN, the hired waiter, in black, are putting the study in order. From the dining-room, the hum of conversation and laughter of many voices are heard.
 PETTERSEN: [*lights a lamp on the chimney-place and places a shade over it*]. Listen to them, Jensen! Now the old man's got to his feet and is proposing a long toast to Mrs. Sorby.
 JENSEN: [*pushing forward an arm-chair*]. Is it true, what folks say, that there's something between them? More than just good friends, eh?
 PETTERSEN: Lord knows.

JENSEN: I've heard tell as he's been a lively customer in his time. A bit of a rake!

PETTERSON: May be.

JENSEN: And he's giving this spread in honour of his son, they say.

PETTERSON: Yes. His son came home yesterday.

JENSEN: This is the first time I ever heard as Mr. Werle had a son.

PETTERSON: Oh yes, he has a son, right enough. But he's a fixture, as you might say, up at the Hoidal Works. He's never once come to town all the years I've been in service here.

Of course, this sort of expositional was nothing new, for in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *THE RIVALS* many of the *dramatis personae* are introduced by name in the opening scene by servants Fag and Thomas.

SCENE ONE. A STREET.

[Enter THOMAS and FAG following]

FAG: What! Thomas! sure 'tis he? What! Thomas! Thomas!

THOMAS: Hey! Odd's life! Mr. Fag! Give us your hand, my old fellow-servant.

FAG: Excuse my glove, Thomas. I'm devilish glad to see you, my lad. Why, my prince of charioteers, you look as hearty! But who the deuce thought of seeing you in Bath?

THOMAS: Sure, master, Madam Julia, Harry, Mrs. Kate, and the postillion, be all come.

FAG: Indeed!

From the opening scene of *THE RIVALS* (1775) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan



***“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on
broken glass.”***

Anton Chekhov

Naturalism and the Twentieth Century

Let’s now move a bit nearer to the present day and the plays of Anton Chekhov in the early twentieth century. Chekhov famously disliked the formalities of the well-made play and preferred instead a style that became known as Naturalism. Essentially the difference between Realism and Naturalism is Realism involves the acceptance of certain artificial conventions as to the way people behave in plays, whereas Naturalism prefers people to behave on stage as they would in real life. Of course Anton Chekhov did famously say that “if there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last,” so he wasn’t against a bit of foreshadowing. But that said, Chekhov’s opening exposition is very different in style at least from the generation of playwrights who came before him. This, for example, is the opening scene of *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* first performed in 1904:

LOPAKHIN: The train’s arrived, thank God. What’s the time?

DUNYASH: It will soon be two. [*Blowing out the candle*] It is light already.

LOPAKHIN: How much was the train late? Two hours at least. I have made a rotten mess of it! I came here on purpose to meet them at the station, and then overslept myself . . . in my chair. It's a pity. I wish you'd wakened me.

DUNYASHA: I thought you'd gone away. I think I hear them coming.

LOPAKHIN: No... They've got to collect their luggage and so on. Lubov Andreyevna has been living abroad for five years; I don't know what she'll be like now... She's a good sort – an easy, simple person. I remember when I was a boy of fifteen, my father, who is dead – he used to keep a shop in the village here – hit me on the face with his fist, and my nose bled... We had gone into the yard together for something or other, and he was a little drunk. Lubov Andreyevna, as I remember her now, was still young, and very thin, and she took me to the washstand here in this very room, the nursery. She said, "Don't cry, little man, it'll be all right in time for your wedding." "Little man"... My father was a peasant, it's true, but here I am in a white waistcoat and yellow shoes... a pearl out of an oyster. I'm rich now, with lots of money, but just think about it and examine me, and you'll find I'm still a peasant down to the marrow of my bones. [*Turning over the pages of his book*] Here I've been reading this book, but I understood nothing. I read and fell asleep.

DUNYASHA: The dogs didn't sleep all night; they know that they're coming.

LOPAKHIN: What's up with you, Dunyasha . . . ?

DUNYASHA: My hands are shaking. I shall faint.

LOPAKHIN: You're too sensitive, Dunyasha. You dress just like a lady, and you do your hair like one too. You oughtn't. You should know your place.

YPIKHODOV: [*Entering with a bouquet*] The gardener sent these; says they're to go into the dining-room. [*Giving the bouquet to DUNYASHA.*]

LOPAKHIN: And you'll bring me some kvass.

DUNYASHA: [*Exiting*] Very well.

YPIKHODOV: There's a frost this morning--three degrees, and the cherry-trees are all in flower. I can't approve of our climate, I can't. Our climate is indisposed to favour us even this once. And, Ermolai Alexeyevitch, allow me to say to you, in addition, that I bought myself some boots two days ago, and I beg to assure you that they squeak in a perfectly unbearable manner. What shall I put on them?

LOPAKHIN: Go away. You bore me.

YPIKHODOV Some misfortune happens to me every day. But I don't complain; I'm used to it, and I can smile. [*DUNYASHA comes in and brings LOPAKHIN some kvass*] I shall go.

[*Knocking over a chair*] There. . . there, you see, if I may use the word, what circumstances I am in, so to speak. It is even simply marvellous.

DUNYASHA: I may confess to you, Ermolai Alexeyevitch, that Ypikhodov has proposed to me.

LOPAKHIN: Ah!

DUNYASHA: I don't know what to do about it. He's a nice young man, but every now and again, when he begins talking, you can't understand a word he's saying. I think I like him. He's madly in love with me.

This opening is certainly more of a ramshackle affair than two gentlemen quietly having coffee while discussing a friend or colleague who is about to arrive. For a start, there's a great deal of movement and fluidity, even comedy in the clumsy Ypikhodov knocking over the chair, but when it comes to expositional technique it's not that different in principle from Ibsen or indeed Shakespeare. When you look at the story information that is imparted in this

scene, you realise that form and styles may change but the issues of establishing who/where/when/what are perennial. The requirements of exposition never change.

“Never underestimate your audience. You can afford to be subtle. Far subtler than you think. They see and hear more than you imagine.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



Darth Vader: Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father.

Luke Skywalker: He told me enough! He told me you killed him!

Darth Vader: “No. I am your father.”

From THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK directed by Irvin Kershner from a screenplay by Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan, based on a story by George Lucas.

(In the radio drama adaptation of THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, Vader does say, “No, Luke. I am your father,” and in JEDI SEARCH by Kevin J. Anderson (1994), Luke remembers Vader saying, “Luke, I am your father,” but in the original movie it was simply “No. I am your father.”)

Cinematic Exposition

The changes brought about in how we experience and process Story as a result of the invention of the cinematic medium cannot be

underestimated. And when it comes to exposition, well, cinematic editing and montage have proved a game changer in how we think about images and connect them.

Shot of exterior of Buckingham Palace.

Cut to interior. A large regal room with oil paintings, covering nearly every inch of every wall.

Cut to a crown on the table on top of a velvet cushion.

Cut to a woman standing in the centre of the room, attended to by servants. These are ladies-in-waiting, for now we see a series of close-up of hands and fingers helping to fit a formal gown on the lady who stands centre.

Are words really necessary to understand what is going on here and who everyone is? Surely we can work out from the images presented that we are in Buckingham Palace and the monarch is preparing for some sort of event.

Cut to several men positioning large professional looking lamps on stands around the nearby throne.

Cut to man standing opposite the throne taking test shots with a camera of the vacant throne.

And now we know that the monarch is about to have her portrait taken.



But how and why do we know all this? Because over the last hundred years or so of cinema, audiences have developed an understanding of what directors and editors call ‘cinema grammar’. What this means is that we have learnt to make certain assumptions and links as a result of the edits between shots. Human beings are hard-wired to find connections and patterns in the world around us – and cinematic edits facilitate just that.

Sometimes directors occasionally play a sleight-of-hand with our learnt cinematic grammar assumptions, intentionally misleading audiences as to where they are for dramatic purposes. In *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS*, for example, this happens as a result of a shot of a male, armed FBI officer disguised as a delivery guy with flowers in his hand pressing a doorbell, which is immediately followed by an image of a ringing bell in the cellar of the serial killer. As it happens, the two are not directly connected at all, for it’s Agent Starling who is really ringing the doorbell at the killer’s home in her separate search for the serial killer ‘Buffalo Bill’. A cut from one shot to another – from outside to inside – shouldn’t necessarily mean

that they are connected, it's just that's the way audiences have learnt to 'read' the grammar of cinema editing over the last century or so.

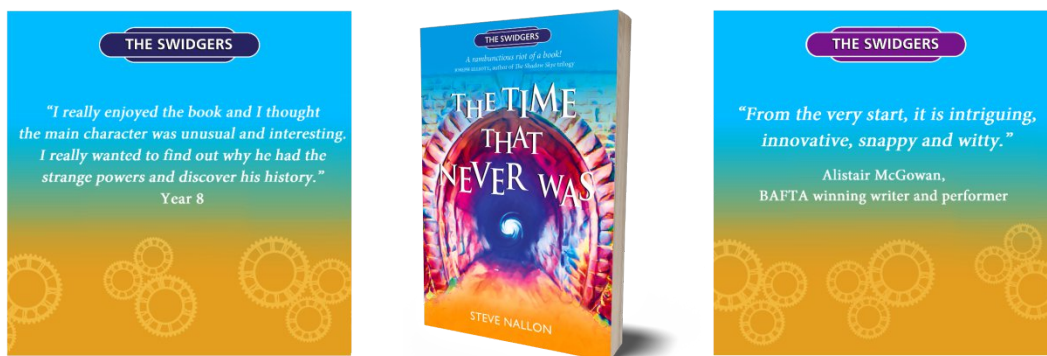


The connecting shots and edits in *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* were meant to fool you and trick you into a false assumption – and indeed they do just that. However, when it comes to exposition in the cinema, the edit is usually your friend. And ‘montage editing’ is arguably cinema’s most effective tool in getting exposition across.

Montage editing was never done better, or more movingly, than in the montage sequence at the beginning of the animation movie *UP*. The series of connecting images takes in Carl’s marriage, his wife’s illness and her eventually death. This is not just exposition, this is a lived life. The sequence also sets up Carl’s loneliness and the grumpy disillusionment of old age. But there are too hints of the seemingly lost dreams of young man that have never quite gone away. It’s pure cinema, beautifully executed and incredibly powerful.

There is as well a specific type of cinematic montage known as ‘American Montage’, which has its roots in the movies of the 1930s.

In American Montage, Time is compressed to a series of clips, often using irregular angular framing, cross-fades and overlays that, as it were, visually concertina events. In Woody Allen's *THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO*, set in the 1930s, the flesh and blood Cecilia literally enters the movie world by walking into (or inside of) the movie screen itself. And in this movie world there is a classic American Montage sequence where Cecilia experiences an exhilarating night on the town with her fictional lover.



A very different but very funny parody of the American Montage format can be found in *NAKED GUN: FROM THE FILES OF POLICE SQUAD* (1988), where the lovers caper around and run slow motion on a beach, plus laugh joyously together as they leave the cinema after seeing, of all things, the blood-splattering war movie *PLATOON*.

A cinematic method of exposition that the early movies pioneered is what academics now call 'non-diegetic intrusion', and what this basically means is story information that comes, as it were, from outside the story world. What we are talking about here are

inter-titles (or title-cards) which tell us in writing who's who, plus where and when we are. In modern cinema this is now usually done as under-text captions, with printed words superimposed over the photographed action. Superimposition of expository information is particularly associated with the thriller and action movie genres, which sometimes even prints out the information as if it's appearing on a typewriter or coming from a computer keyboard. This method sub-title method of expositional technique became popular as a result of its use in the 1962 Michael Caine spy thriller *THE IPCRESS FILE*.



But of course cinema audiences don't go to the movies to read, so the use of expository under-titles/sub-titles or inter-titles tends to be limited to a few words, usually just providing basic facts about time and location. However, *STAR WARS* intentionally made a feature of this expositional method with its opening lines in blue typeface – "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." – which become a crawl of words that eventually faded into the blackness of

space with John Williams' brass heavy orchestral score playing in the background. Never before had expositional text been so dramatic or thrilling.

The cinematic medium also offers other forms of expositional technique, but not all of them are welcomed by screenwriting experts. For example, Robert McKee dislikes voice-over exposition in the movies precisely because cinema is meant to be a visual medium. However, story gurus tend to be more forgiving when it comes to what you might call 'vision-over' exposition. What happens in vision-over is that when there is an expositional character speaking and telling you the necessary information, there appears on the screen images from the events or action that he or she is talking about. These images are not in anyway mindscreen visions of the explainer, as they do not represent his or her memory. It's that the objective narrator filmmaker chooses to impose over that speech secondary images. Hence the term vision-over.

Expositional flashbacks are not usually encouraged by story gurus, but as with every rule there are exceptions. And, as Robert McKee points out in his talks and lectures, when curiosity is raised to such a level that you are desperate know what did happen, then that's the time for the legitimate use of the flashback. And McKee champions in his lectures the long Paris flashback sequence in CASABLANCA.

Another advantage that the cinema has when it comes to exposition is the close-up, for in a close-up those battling with story information have the skills of the actor to help them. Obviously an actor's face can't reveal when and where they were born, but film acting, as Dirk Bogarde always said, is essentially photographed thought. And a good actor can tell you much with their eyes and their expressions.



A quick mention here for music and the cinematic score. Theatre of course has often used period music to help set the scene, but the uniqueness of cinema is its varied soundtrack. What Homer did with recurring epithets, pithy tags that established who people were ("grey-eyed Athena," "swift-footed Achilles"), what time of day it was ("rose-touched dawn") or the place where we were in the story ("the wine-dark sea"), are nowadays achieved with melodic motifs and choices of musical instruments. Think of the theme that warns us of Darth Vader's arrival or the sound of bagpipes that tells us we are now in Scotland. In *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST* it's possible to argue that the character motifs by composer Ennio

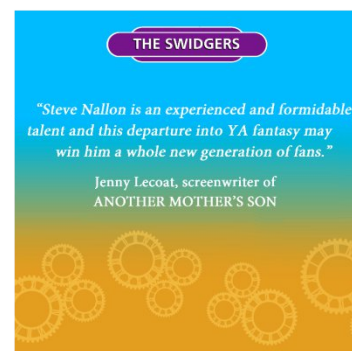
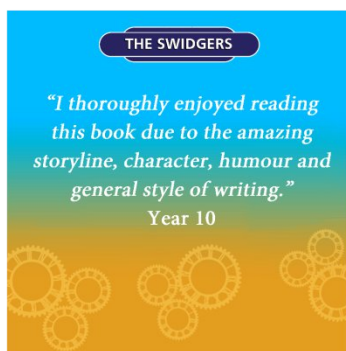
Morricone, as they were written ahead of filming, even helped the actors with their characterisation. And in *ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA*, Morricone's musical motifs were, it is reported, even played on set while the actors were making their entrances.



It's worth pointing out before leaving the expositional techniques of cinema that some of that craft has morphed its way into narrative fiction. Evelyn Waugh in his novels originated, for example, sequences of short scenes of dialogue, without any name tags to say who was speaking, which is essentially a technique which came from cinematic editing and montage. You might also add here the current fashion for novels, particularly those aimed at a younger readership, being written in the present tense, where you could say it's as though the story, like a movie, is happening right there in the now. In fact, writers of fiction today can't help but think cinematically because that is how they have been experiencing Story from the time they are toddlers.

“Background music may also be considered a source of information in the motion picture. Its information is not direct, however, as is that of the noise or picture. We might say that it expresses information in a third dimension, namely, emotion and mood... Background music has no independent life, but it is composed to serve the story.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)





Exposition – Practical Techniques and Devices

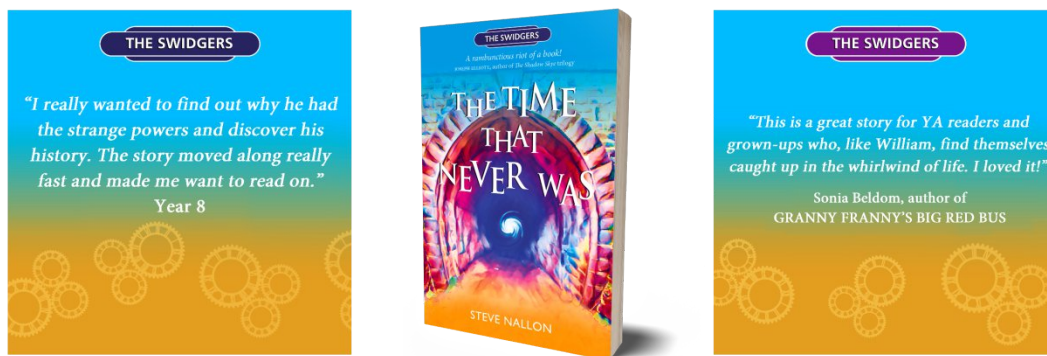
‘Actions speak louder than words.’
A popular maxim.

Role and Character

Conflict is the engine of drama. And to dramatise essentially means adding an element of conflict between characters. A classic method then of dramatising exposition is to formalise exchanges and interactions as some kind of interrogation or questioning, where one person wants information and the other is reluctant to give it. Think here of an authority figure questioners such as a police officer, a headmaster or a gatekeeper. And create as well, if you can, a specific reason why the character who is quizzed is resistant to questioning.

At the other end of the scale is to have a character who, by nature, is over talkative. Sometimes people jabber away ten-to-the-dozen when they talk to you because they are lonely. Think of the well-meaning old man you sometimes find yourself sitting next to on a park bench or bus. The character sat next to them may not at first

want to listen, but then some vital story information is unknowing passed on by our lonesome but chatty friend. And these are the sort of characters that often pop up in whodunits and television murder mysteries.



Then there's the type of character who is talkative because they are fun and full of energy. Like the ebullient and entertaining driver in *DIE HARD*, who, on the journey across Los Angeles, fills in John McClane (and us) on pretty much everything that's going on that night. And importantly, from a plot point of view, he's not wasted as a character, for, as the chauffeur of the limousine, he becomes crucial to events later in the story.

Another character based way of rendering exposition invisible is to make the person passing on the information a little unusual or quirky in manner or appearance. A classic example of this is in *SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* when Clarice visits two nerdy etymologists who are experts in moths and keen to talk about them. Their nerdy

nature might have been enough in itself to make the scene interesting but then, in the middle of the examination of the moth that Clarice has brought with her, one of the men says to her, “What do you do when you’re not detecting, Agent Starling?” He then asks Clarice out on a date, which ends up with Starling saying, “Are you hitting on me?” This scene has now become one with an awkward sexual subtext, but then the other guy probing Clarice’s moth suddenly says how incredibly rare it is – “Somebody grew this guy. Fed him honey and nightshade, kept him warm. Somebody loved him.” The nerdy scientist immediately loses interest in Agent Starling and turns all his attention back to this extraordinary moth, because, well, moths are his true passion. And his love for moths is infectious because now we as an audience are interested as well. It’s a scene of pure expositional information, but with the awkward geeky scientists it has a quirky feel, and, for a time at least, awkward underlying sexual tension.

“The experienced writer can exploit the attraction of a good auxiliary goal... A person approaches a man in an attempt to learn something which is extremely interesting. The man, through stupidity or a will, talks about everything else, but not about the particular subject. ‘Everything else’ the man talks about, is of course exposition and information which we would hardly want to listen to if it were not for our forward movement caused by the anticipated auxiliary goal. The writer has transformed a deficiency into an excellent dramatic effect. Not only does he give as the exposition, but in doing so he accentuates are anticipation by

making us impatient. The auxiliary goal as a magnet draws us over the slow spots.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



MR. PINK: So who's the rat this time? Mr. Blue? Mr. Blonde? Joe? It's Joe's show, he set this whole thing up. Maybe he set it up to set it up.

MR. WHITE: I don't buy it. Me and Joe go back a long time. I can tell ya straight up, Joe definitely didn't have anything to do with this bulls**t.

MR. PINK: Oh, you and Joe go back a long time. I known Joe since I was a kid. But me saying Joe definitely couldn't have done it is ridiculous. I can say I definitely didn't do it, cause know what I did or didn't do.

From RESERVOIR DOGS, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino

Action Dialogue

Action dialogue is arguably the writer's best method of exposition. Well, certainly for the screenwriter and the playwright. And action dialogue depends on wants and so the easiest option in order to get exposition across in a dramatic way is put the characters in a situation where they want to know something. Or better still, *are desperate to know*. Take this exchange in RESERVOIR DOGS:

MR. PINK: Was that a f***ing set-up or what?
 [Mr. Pink sees Mr. Orange on the floor, shot and bloody.]
 MR. PINK: Oh f***, Orange got tagged.
 [*Throughout this scene, we hear Mr. Orange moaning.*]
 MR. WHITE: Gun shot.
 MR. PINK: Oh that's just f***ing great! Where's Brown?
 MR. WHITE: Dead.
 MR. PINK: Goddamn, goddamn! How did he die?
 MR. WHITE: How the f*** do you think? The cops shot him.
 MR. PINK: Oh this is bad, this is so bad. [*looking to Mr. Orange*] Is it bad?
 MR. WHITE: As opposed to good?
 MR. PINK: This is so f***ed up. Somebody f***ed us big time.

This exchange sets up two fundamental wants. First, *the want to know what happened*. But second, *the want to know the identity of the informer*. And these action-wants continue into the next scene:

MR. WHITE: Want a smoke?
 MR. PINK: Why not?
 [*The two men light up.*]
 MR. WHITE: Okay, let's go through what happened. We're in the place, everything's going fine. Then the alarm gets tripped. I turn around and all these cops are outside. You're right, it was like, bam! I blink my eyes are they're there. Everybody starts going apesh**. Then Mr. Blonde starts shootin' all the –
 MR. PINK: – That's not correct.
 MR. WHITE: What's wrong with it?
 MR. PINK: The cops didn't show up after the alarm went off. They didn't show till after Mr. Blonde started shooting everyone.

MR. WHITE: As soon as I heard the alarm, I saw the cops.

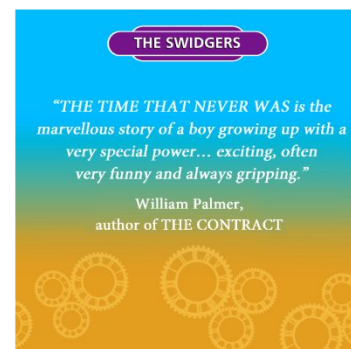
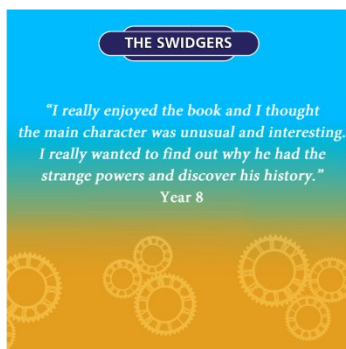
MR. PINK: I'm telling ya, it wasn't that soon. They didn't let their presence be known until after Mr. Blonde went off. I'm not sayin' they weren't there, I'm sayin' they were there. But they didn't move in till Mr. Blonde became a madman. That's how I know we were set up. You can see that, can't you, Mr. White?

MR. WHITE: Look, enough of this "Mr White" sh**—

MR. PINK: — Don't tell me your name, I don't want to know! I sure as hell ain't gonna tell ya mine.

MR. WHITE: You're right, this is bad. *[pause]* How did you get out?

MR. PINK: Shot my way out. Everybody was shooting, so I just blasted my way outta there.



Now we know some of what happened, but in the action dialogue here neither Mr. White nor Mr. Pink can be certain that the other isn't the police informer. Notice Mr. Pink correcting Mr. White, and notice too Mr. Pink not wanting to share their true names. Does Mr. Pink think Mr. White may be the informer? The point here is that Tarantio has given the actors a lot to go for, many actions and intentions, and in so doing the

exchanges get the robbery exposition across but without it ever seeming like exposition.

Mr. Pink: I can say I definitely didn't do it because I know what I did or didn't do. But I cannot definitely say that about anybody else, 'cause I don't definitely know.
MR. PINK: For all I know, you're the rat.

MR. WHITE: For all I know you're the fing rat!***

MR. PINK: All right, now you're using your fing head!***

From RESERVOIR DOGS, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino



“It is tempting to say the prop in the motion picture takes the place of the adjective in the novel. The novelist may say ‘an elegant woman’. The screenwriter may show her in a mink coat. The novelist may say ‘a messy room’. The screenwriter may show empty cans on the floor.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

‘Show, Don’t Tell’

‘Show’ can mean dramatise, as in an interrogational interview or having a specific reason or motivation for wanting to pass on information, but it can also simply mean show as in make visible. We’ve already seen this sense of show in the opening of THE CHERRY ORCHARD – and seen there is the operative word – for Lopakhin is

found reading a book he says he doesn't understand, and Dunyasha, the maid, is perceived to be, at least in Lopakhin's eyes, dressed way above her station. Yes, there is dialogue but what we see as an image right there in front of us is equally expositional. And this brings us to that most useful of expositional visual shorthand of all, namely, photographs. When it comes to exposition, the photograph or painting is cinema's trump card.

Careful framing to include photographs on walls, on pianos or on desks has now become the standard method in movies to speedily and efficiently give the viewing audience important and primary story information. In *TITANIC*, the family photos give us sense of Rose's adventurous life after the ship's sinking, in *SWINGERS* we see snap-shots of previous girlfriends and in *FIVE EASY PIECES* photographs of the then youthful protagonist playing the piano adorn the furniture of an elegant house. Such images present mainly background details, but photographs can also, if carefully placed, very efficiently, and relatively unobtrusively, pass on current story information. A good example of this is in *CASTAWAY* in the scene where the wife hears that the husband, who was thought by all to be lost or drowned, is actually very much alive. As she receives the call as she is standing next to her fridge door upon which are various family photographs revealing she now has a new husband and several children – and when she drops the milk in shock as she is told her former husband is alive, the fridge door is pushed

aside to reveal that new family. Pure visuals, and over in seconds, but those carefully positioned images saved endless expositional dialogue and much screen time.

Properties are, as every actor knows, ‘rightly called props’. To be specific props/properties in the theatre are those items which an actor carries with them on stage or picks up and uses on some occasion or other. Sometimes a specific prop gets associated with a particular character to such a degree that it operates as a character *motif*. For example, the walking stick of Mr. Kringle, the supposed Santa Claus in MIRACLE ON 34th STREET. And so when it’s found at the house the young girl always wanted, we know ‘Santa has been’ because there’s his walking stick by the fireplace. That’s the image the movie ends on – and it’s pure visual exposition.



Many props in the movies, and indeed costumes, often have coded significance, which is to say that they usually have a connection (and indeed implied meaning) to a particular type of

person (in Films Studies parlance what we are talking about here are 'signifiers' and 'signs'). Eugene Vale in *THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING*, written incidentally way back in 1944, argues that a prop in a screenplay is like an adjective in a novel and he gives the example where mink coat equates to 'elegant' woman and empty cans on floor informs you it's a 'messy' room. Sometimes this association is literal, sometimes metaphorical or sometimes iconic. Or all three at the same time. A cuddly toy bear in *THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER* is what the young daughter wants her CIA analyst and former marine Jack Ryan to bring her home. And he does. But it's not just a literal toy bear, for 'The Bear' is also an iconic political term for the USSR, and so when the Soviet submarine is captured, Ryan brings home not only a literal bear but one that's iconic and acts as metaphor for victory.



But isn't all this talk of visual imagery and exposition really only appropriate to the cinematic medium? Do visual images have the same importance or relevance for the theatre or the novel? Well, yes, they can do if presented well. Take photographs or paintings. Of

course it would be possible for a novelist/narrator simply to tell the reader that the protagonist in *THREE EASY PIECES* once used to play the piano or that Rose in *TITANIC* in later life learnt to ride horses, but perhaps a far more subtle way of doing might be to have someone pick up one of the photographs from the mantelpiece or that elegant side table and comment on it.



And of course novelists constantly use props as a way of establishing character. Think of Aloysius, the teddy bear companion of Sebastian in *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*. Sebastian is a Peter Pan figure who is afraid of growing up and facing adult responsibilities. And in a way the teddy bear shows us that. As for theatre and expositional props, well the drama *TOM AND CLEM* by Stephen Churchett begins with the taking down of a painting of Winston Churchill and replacing it with one of Clement Atlee. This action and image immediately sets up the time period of 1945 when there was a change of government, and, as it's the painting of a politician on the wall, one might infer that we are in some sort of government office.

It's a simple action but it's the sort of expositional short-hand that saves several lines of dry dialogue.

“One can feel sad or happy or bored or cross in thousand ways: the abstract adjective says almost nothing. The precise gesture nails down the one feeling right for the moment. This is what is meant when writing teachers say that one should ‘show’ and not ‘tell’. And this, it should be added, is all the writing teaching means. Good writers may ‘tell’ about almost anything in fiction except the characters’ feelings. One may tell the reader that the character went to a private school (one need not show a scene in a private school if the scene has no importance for the rest of the narrative), or one may tell the reader that the character hates spaghetti; but with rare exceptions the characters’ feelings must be demonstrated: fear, love, excitement, doubt, embarrassment, despair become real only when they take the form of events – action (or gesture), dialogue or physical reaction to setting. Detail is the lifeblood of fiction.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



TOM HAGEN: I have to get back to work. It's part of the wedding. No Sicilian can ever refuse a request on his daughter's wedding day.

From THE GODFATHER, written and directed by Francis Ford Coppola and based on the novel by Mario Puzo

Performative Situations and Social Customs

Performative simply means that which involves, or is characterised by, some of performance, presentation or social formality. What we are talking about here is a speech that is part of some sort of work, social or cultural event, for example, the best man's speech at a wedding, or a sermon in church or a lecture in a university. From a linguistic point of view, 'performative' can in fact relate to any utterance where a speaker performs a particular action, *I apologise, I promise, I request, I wager* or whatever. And both meanings can be useful when thinking about expository technique.



Most public speaking is performative. A campaigning address at a political hustings, a thank you speech at leaving party, the eulogy at a funeral. These kinds of speeches are usually packed with details, biographical history, personal anecdotes and the rest, but because

such things are expected in these speeches, the giving of that information all seems natural enough. And that's why performative occasions are so useful for the writer grappling with exposition. Put in a speech that's part of a social occasion and no one will notice that it is exposition.

And performative occasions and settings needn't just be in public. An eyewitness account given to the police, being questioned in the headmaster's study, or a confession to a priest, are all performative in the linguistic sense of performing a particular act or action. And of course in each of these situations the reader or audience would consider it natural enough for information to be given or passed on.



In fact there are many scenarios and social situations in life where information is expected or required and these help a writer disguise what is essentially blatant exposition. Not only that, certain social events allow a writer to establish the social position or rank of a character. The wedding in the opening *THE GODFATHER* is a brilliant example this. In *THE GODFATHER* the events of wedding day

go beyond the standard social occasion of a marriage, for on such a day the 'Godfather' – the head of the mafia family – cannot by custom and tradition turn down a request. And remember linguistically *I request* is a performative act. Various meetings are arranged with the Godfather and numerous favours asked. These encounters soon establish the central characters and their status within the mafia family, plus various sub-plots. Likewise, the celebrations that follow Anthony's first communion and the receiving of the Papal Order in the two GODFATHER sequels perform similar expository functions.

In RESERVOIR DOGS Quentin Tarantino uses the more downmarket social situation of a gathering of a gang in a restaurant to establish his story information. And the argument about tip giving and quarrel about names and who should allocate them ("You get four guys all fighting over who's gonna be Mr. Black, but they don't know each other, so nobody wants to back down. No way. I pick. You're Mr. Pink. Be thankful you're not Mr. Yellow"), certainly gives the audience an immediate feel for the temperament and outlook of each of the players. And using such mundane minutiae as a means of exposition, along, of course, with guns blowing people's insides out, has become a hallmark of the Quentin Tarantino movie.

"Show the readers everything, tell them nothing."
Ernest Hemingway



JOAN: When I put my ear against the side of the lorry I heard crying inside.

HARPER: How could you do that from up in the tree?

JOAN: I got down from the tree. I went to the lorry after I looked in the window of the shed.

HARPER: There might be things that are not your business when you're a visitor in someone else's house.

JOAN: Yes, I'd rather not have seen. I'm sorry.

HARPER: Nobody saw you?

JOAN: They were thinking about themselves.

HARPER: I think it's lucky nobody saw you.

JOAN: If it's a party, why was there so much blood?

HARPER: There isn't any blood.

JOAN: Yes.

HARPER: Where?

JOAN: On the ground.

HARPER: In the dark? How would you see that in the dark?

JOAN: It slipped in it.

FROM Caryl Churchill's FAR AWAY

Questions Not Statements

Much of act one of Caryl Churchill's dystopia play FAR AWAY is made up of questions and answers. Well, partial answers. Joan, a young girl, is staying with her aunt and in the night she gets up to see what the noise is outside. It's never exactly clear what was going on

but with the persistent questioning of Harper by the young girl, it becomes clear to the audience that people, including children, are being transported in lorries to their death. Harper's answers are sometimes down and out lies, but Joan is no fool and she picks up on any inconsistency.

FAR AWAY is a remarkable play. The first act may be mainly questions and answers, but the quality of Churchill's writing conjures up in the mind's eye fragments of images that together make up what is clearly a terrible and wicked crime.

JOAN: Why were there children in the shed?

HARPER: What children?

JOAN: Don't you know what children?

HARPER: How could you see there were children?

JOAN: There was a light on. That's how I could see blood inside the shed. I could see the faces and which ones had blood on.

HARPER: You've found out something secret. You know that don't you?

JOAN: Yes.

FROM Caryl Churchill's FAR AWAY



*'In every job that must be done
There is an element of fun
You find the fun and snap!
The job's a game.'*

***Spoonful of Sugar* by songwriters Richard Sherman and Robert Sherman**

Exposition as a Game

Have a look at this scene from THE SIXTH SENSE:

MALCOLM CROWE: Wanna play a game? It's a mind-reading game. Here's how it works. I read your mind. If what I say is right, you take one step towards the chair. If what I say is wrong, you take one step back... towards the doorway. If you reach the chair, you sit down. If you reach the door, you can go. Wanna play?

Cole nods.

MALCOLM CROWE: Okay... When your mother and father were first divorced, your mom went to see a doctor like me, and he didn't help her. So you think I'm not going to be able to help you.

Cole takes a step forward.

MALCOLM CROWE: You're worried that she said she told him things - things she couldn't tell anyone else... Secrets.

Cole takes another step forwards.

MALCOLM CROWE: You have a secret, but you don't want to tell me.

Cole takes another step forwards.

MALCOLM CROWE: Your dad gave you that watch as a present just before he went away.

COLE SEAR: He forgot it in a drawer. Doesn't work.

MALCOLM CROWE: You keep pretty quiet in school, but... you're a good student, you've never really been in any serious trouble.

Cole takes another step back.

COLE SEAR: We were supposed to draw a picture. Anything we wanted. I drew a man. He got hurt in the neck by another man with a screwdriver.

MALCOLM CROWE: You saw that on TV, Cole?

Cole steps back again.

COLE SEAR: Everyone got upset. They had a meeting. Mom started crying. I don't draw like that anymore.

MALCOLM CROWE: How do you draw now?

COLE SEAR: I draw... people smiling, dogs running, rainbows. They don't have meetings about rainbows.

MALCOLM CROWE: No, I guess they don't.

COLE SEAR: What am I thinking now?

MALCOLM CROWE: I don't know what you're thinking now.

Cole takes his last step back towards the door.

COLE SEAR: I was thinking... you're nice, but you can't help me.

Now this scene from GOD AND MONSTERS:

JAMES WHALE: I have a proposal, Mr. Kay. This mode of questioning is getting old, don't you think?

EDMUND KAY: I don't mind.

JAMES WHALE: Let's make it more interesting. I will answer any question you ask. But, for each answer, you must remove one article of clothing.

Kay's mouth pops open.

EDMUND KAY: That's funny, Mr. Whale.

WHALE It is, isn't it? My life as a game of strip poker. Shall we play?

Now this scene from THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS:

HANNIBAL LECTER: Quid pro quo. I tell you things, you tell me things. Not about this case, though, about yourself. Quid pro quo. Yes or no? Yes or no, Clarice? Poor little Catherine is waiting.

CLARICE STARLING: Go, Doctor.

HANNIBAL LECTER: What is your worst memory of childhood?

CLARICE STARLING: The death of my father.

HANNIBAL LECTER: Tell me about it and don't lie, or I'll know.

CLARICE STARLING: He was a town marshal, and... one night, he surprised two burglars coming out the back of a drugstore. They shot him.

HANNIBAL LECTER: Was he killed outright?

CLARICE STARLING: No, he was very strong, he lasted more than a month. My mother died when I was very young, so... my father had become the whole world to me, and, when he left me, I had nothing. I was ten years old.

HANNIBAL LECTOR: You're very frank, Clarice. I think it would be quite something to know you in private life.

Games. Yet each is packed with story information.

Mary Poppins was right. And her rule in the song *Spoonful of Sugar* can equally apply to exposition – *Find the fun and snap! The job's a game.*

"It's like, in movies where you talk to the audience ninety percent of the time, it's – you kind of want to stay away from that stuff. But, you know - but to write exposition brilliantly is hard."

Richard Jenkins, actor



“In former centuries it was enough to hang a curtain on a stage to represent a wall; a chair could symbolise a fountain, a bench a bed. The imagination of the spectator would transform these symbols into reality. From the motion picture we expect more realism because the sharp-eyed camera is a photographic representation of the world.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

The Exposition of Time Passing

Eugene Vale makes the point in his 1944 book THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING that “it is sufficient to identify a certain place once because place remains the same... not so in regard to time. Time, which is forever changing, must be constantly exposed.” An obvious observation perhaps but one worth baring in mind because sometimes when watching movies, especially those using flashbacks or multiple time sequences, it is easy to get lost in the time line.

And even simple time passing has its problems, as you don’t really want a title-card or screen text popping up saying ‘Five minutes later’ and then ‘Another five minutes later’. David Mamet’s book ON DIRECTING FILM is in part a transcript of a series of workshops with students at the Columbia University Film School.

One lesson takes a lengthy look at how exactly the filmmaker can establish in an interesting and original way the character action of time waiting in a scenario about a student who has come into college early to meet a professor. It's a fascinating read and sums up the attitude of a writer and director who never accepts or takes the most obvious option.

Of course, the classic way of establishing time moving on in the movies has always been the clock face with the dials speeded up. Then there's the ashtray with an ever growing number of cigarette ends, or, for months of time passing, the cycles of the moon, and for years going by, a montage of leaves falling, the arrival of snow, the breaking of spring and sunny sky of summer.

The fast motion camera is another of the cinema's apparent advantages when a story needs to establish time moving on. In the movie *THE TIME MACHINE* (1960) time literally passes by at speed because it's a time travel story. But the way our time traveller sees time moving quickly by is done in an entertaining sequence of images where the protagonist, one H. George Wells, sits in his time machine and sees the alterations in fashion between the years 1900 and 1917. Time is indicated by cinematic fast motion, where our time traveller sees speeded up action and the ever changing outfits worn by the manikin in a ladies fashion shop – "I began to grow very fond of that manikin. Maybe because like me she didn't age."

But there is a time travel story of sorts that came well before the invention of the fast motion camera – and that’s Charles Dickens’s *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*. Here’s a brief extract from Stave Two where Scrooge sees himself as a boy left alone at Christmas:

“I wish,” Scrooge muttered, putting his hand in his pocket, and looking about him, after drying his eyes with his cuff: “but it’s too late now.”

“What is the matter?” asked the Spirit.

“Nothing,” said Scrooge. “Nothing. There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something: that’s all.”

The Ghost smiled thoughtfully, and waved its hand: saying as it did so, “Let us see another Christmas!”

Scrooge’s former self grew larger at the words, and the room became a little darker and more dirty. The panels shrunk, the windows cracked; fragments of plaster fell out of the ceiling, and the naked laths were shown instead; but how all this was brought about, Scrooge knew no more than you do. He only knew that it was quite correct; that everything had happened so; that there he was, alone again, when all the other boys had gone home for the jolly holidays.

The theme as ever with Dickens is memory but it’s curious how the description of time moving on reads very much like the sort of fast motion film montage that we are now accustomed to in the movies. Besides being an efficient expositional tool to establish time passing, this passage is a reminder of Dickens’ extraordinary visual imagination. Dickens was, as ever you might say, ahead of his time.

“It is sufficient to identify a certain place once because place remains the same... Not so in regard to time. Time, which is forever changing, must be constantly exposed.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



MRS. KENSINGTON: *Hello, Austin.*

[A flashing red light goes off and the phone rings.]

MRS. KENSINGTON: *That'll be Basil Exposition, Chief of British Intelligence.*

[The glove compartment revolves to reveal a picture phone. We see BASIL EXPOSITION a distinguished older man. A desk plate reads: "Basil Exposition, Chief of British Intelligence."]

BASIL EXPOSITION: *[On picture phone] Hello, Austin. This is Basil Exposition, Chief of British Intelligence*

The Explainer

The movie begins with a helicopter arriving. It lands and a figure gets out. Several police officers approach the man and guide the new arrival to the crime scene. As they walk, the officers brief the man who stepped out of the helicopter as to what is happening. But of course, the brief isn't just for him, it's for the audience in the cinema too. The film is MERCURY RISING, but the arrival of the newcomer and the explainer or explainers who fill him or her in on what is going on, could apply to any number of movies.

‘The Explainer’ is there first and foremost to establish story information, whether it be scientific, historical or plot related. In OUTBREAK, for example, it is mainly about the unfolding medical disaster, whereas in THINGS TO DO IN DENVER WHEN YOU’RE DEAD Joe sits in café and tells you what the words mean. Often the explainer character is clumsily written, but at least our officers on the ground in MERCURY RISING have a reason to say all that they have to say. So too does M in the Bond movies, but less so Basil Exposition in AUSTIN POWERS, a character with no motivation or dramatic function other than filling you in on the plot. But that’s the joke, as the name Basil Exposition suggests, for AUSTIN POWERS is of course a parody. And a very funny one, too.



So how do you make your explainer less clumsy and more dramatically palatable? One way is to wait until curiosity is such that the audience are longing for some explanation. This is certainly the case with NORTH BY NORTHWEST. By time Leo G. Carroll as ‘The

Professor' comes onto the scene, the audience are pretty desperate to know what the heck is going on. When the explanation comes it is to a room filled with people who are probably already aware what the facts are, thus breaking one of the golden rules of exposition of not telling people things they already know. But who cares? We don't, we need to know, so we just lap it up.



Interestingly, NORTH BY NORTHWEST has a scene where we the audience know more than the protagonist Roger Thornhill, played by Cary Grant. And when The Professor passes on this information to Thornhill, Hitchcock sets it against aircraft noise. We don't need to hear it, but we do need to see Thornhill's reaction. And with Cary Grant, being a very fine actor, his face and the look in his eyes are enough to tell you (or show you) that he now fully understands what has been going on, which is that Eve Kendall, played by Eva Marie Saint, is in fact working for The Professor and not, as Thornhill thought, the bad guys. There's a similar reaction scene in the movie VERDICT where we are not privy to what is said, for we the audience know more than the lawyer protagonist. Again

it's more about the look on the face as the information is imparted rather than the information itself.

Making The Explainer a bit weird or eccentric can help sugar the pill of the exposition too. This is the case in INDEPENDENCE DAY with the long haired and very strange Dr. Brakish Okun, played for all he's worth by Brent Spiner, who, in actor parlance, 'chews the carpet'. In fact there are actors who are particularly good in the role of expositional experts. Forest Whitaker, for example, who's a very fine character actor, has the remarkable ability to make expositional dialogue or speeches seem easy. Which they're not. Another way to make The Explainer interesting is not to see him, as in CHARLIE'S ANGELS or the pre-recorded message in MISSION IMPOSSIBLE – "Your mission, should you choose to accept it..."

"I hate exposition and superfluous dialogue. I hate when dialogue is trying to explain or patronise or finger-point."

Lynne Ramsay, Scottish film director, writer, producer and cinematographer



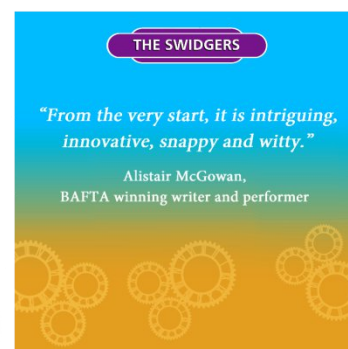
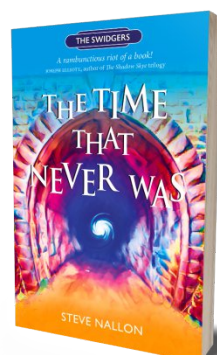
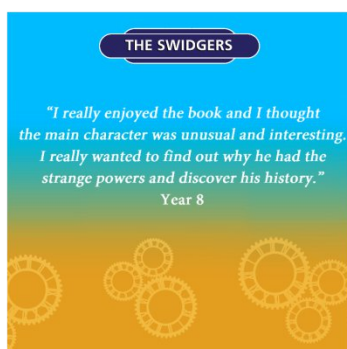
LONG SHOT OF REVOLVING GLOBE

NEWSREEL NARRATOR: *With the coming of the Second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully, or desperately, toward the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point. But, not everybody could get to Lisbon directly, and so a tortuous, roundabout refugee trail sprang up - Paris to Marseilles... across the Mediterranean to Oran... then by train, or auto, or foot across the rim of Africa, to Casablanca in French Morocco. Here, the fortunate ones through money, or influence, or luck, might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon; and from Lisbon, to the New World. But the others wait in Casablanca... and wait... and wait... and wait.*

The opening of the movie CASABLANCA

News Media

News media, whether it be an old black and white newsreel, spinning front pages from the print media, or notifications from Twitter, are all ways to get exposition across. In CASABLANCA it's the traditional newsreel, in the play THE MOUSETRAP it's a radio broadcast announcement, in THE GODFATHER and ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES it's newsprint and spinning headlines.



CNN has been since its formation has been what you might say the writer's collaborator. It's the CNN news reporter on board a noisy French aircraft carrier at the beginning of CRIMSON TIDE tells us, as planes take off around him, that it's the "worst stand off since the Cuban missile crisis" and in Baz Luhrmann's ROMEO AND JULIET Shakespeare's Prologue is even turned into a breaking news report. We read news, we watch news, we consume news. It's in integral part of modern life – and a very useful tool the writer grappling with exposition. You'll find it in various incarnations of the years in THE FUGITIVE, ROBOCOP, BABYLON, SINGING IN THE RAIN STARSHIP TROOPERS and indeed movies of all genres.

CNN REPORTER: This is Richard Valeriani reporting live for CNN from the French aircraft carrier Foch somewhere in the Mediterranean. Six days ago, as the rebellion in Chechnya spread to the neighbouring Caucasus republics, the Russian president ordered massive bombing strikes against rebel positions around Rutul and Belokany. Appalled at the loss of human life, the President of the United States joined by the French president and the British prime minister suspended all foreign aid to Russia. Ultranationalist leader Vladimir Radchenko denounced the U.S. pressure as an act of war against the Russian Republic and Russian sovereignty. Denouncing his own president as a U.S. puppet he called on the Russian people to join him in revolt. He said, "This brutish and hypocritical American intervention will not go unanswered." On Tuesday, at 10:00 in the morning Moscow time the Russian parliament was suspended and martial law was declared. With the government in crisis, the Russian Republic was entering into what can only be described as a state of civil war. Then yesterday at dawn,

Radchenko and rebel forces seized the region around Vladivostok, including a naval base and a nuclear missile base housing Russian ICBMs. As regular Russian military forces move in to encircle Radchenko allied military forces are in a state of high alert. These French planes taking off behind me have been deployed near the Caucasus since the beginning of the crisis and a crisis which started in the Caucasus has now spread to the Far East and appears to be turning into the worst standoff since the Cuban missile crisis. This is Richard Valeriani reporting live for CNN from the French aircraft carrier Foch, somewhere in the Mediterranean.

From the opening of CRIMSON TIDE, directed by Tony Scott, screenplay by Michael Schiffer from a story by Richard P. Henrick and Michael Schiffer



“Certain information may not be needed until much later in the story, it can be given earlier, since it will remain valid until such time as it is needed. Professionally this is called the ‘planting’ of information. The advantage is that the information may be planted wherever it is convenient while the fruit may be gathered at a later stage.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Expositional Set-ups and Pay-offs

The set-up/pay-off is a special sort of exposition because the pay-off to the set-up is often unexpected. Think of the helmet in TOY STORY that is used like a magnifying glass to light the fuse that sends both Woody and Buzz Lightyear into space. Of course we’d already

seen the principle of this with Sid's wicked ways with his toys as he uses the sun's rays to burn his toy. But at the moment of need it's an idea that's used by Woody in a different and more positive manner. Another pay-off is the sudden appearance of the mysterious housebound Boo Radley in *TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD*, who becomes the unlikely rescuer in the fire. The point is the set-up is carefully placed early in both stories, but the context in which it is later used is unexpected. Set-up and pay-off should obviously be connected, but ideally the link between them should be carefully disguised until it is needed.

In fact in certain genres it's essential for the pay-off to work, that the set-up for it is cloaked in some way. For example, in crime fiction, the big clue is usually there along, but it's not understood to be a clue until the detective recognises it for whatever it truly is. Hiding in plain sight, as they say. An example of this is the reference to German measles in Agatha Christie's *THE MIRROR CRACKED FROM SIDE TO SIDE*. It's true significance is not understood until quite late in the tale. And in the principle of hidden in plain sight is as well crucial in farce, for no object in farce comedy should ever be used for what it is usually used for. The glass eye, for example, that comes from the corpse in Joe Orton's *LOOT* becomes, at least to unsuspecting mouth and tongue of Inspector Truscott, a lickable gobstopper.

“To have the end buried in the beginning (which is the most accomplishment of drama), however, is a bit more difficult.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE



“And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!”

The final lines of Charles Dicken’s A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Epilogue Exposition

Epilogue Exposition is that which gives the reader or audience a sense of the new lives of characters at the close of the story. A classic example of this is A CHRISTMAS CAROL. There’s little that’s new in the final paragraphs, though Dickens does emphasise that Tiny Tim did NOT die – and does so with capital letters. Scrooge after all is now a changed man and determined to help his clerk:

“A merry Christmas, Bob,” said Scrooge, with an earnestness that could not be mistaken, as he clapped him on the back. “A merrier Christmas, Bob, my good fellow, than I have given you for many a year. I’ll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas

bowl of smoking bishop, Bob. Make up the fires, and buy a second coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!”

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.

Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

He had no further intercourse with Spirits, in that respect, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.

May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!

It's rare in fact in epilogue exposition to introduce anything new or unpredictable. That said, whether certain characters lived or died is revealed in the epilogues to *STAND BY ME* and *AMERICAN GRAFFITI*.

Some more thoughts on exposition, its craft and problems...

"It is obvious that any kind of exposition takes up space. If we have to expose place and time for about thirty scenes, the space available to the motion picture begins to dwindle before our eyes. No wonder that many a writer in his desperation or through lack of knowledge of the requirements of the motion picture neglects the exposition of place and time... The information can be given to us beforehand, at the very beginning of the scene, or later during the course of the scene. Each of these methods is practicable as long as we know the effect of this timing up on the story and the audience."

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

"If there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last."

Anton Chekhov, playwright and short story writer

"Plot exposition that can be gently wound out by the authorial voice and internal monologue of a character in the length of a page has to be delivered in a matter of seconds on the stage."

Terry Pratchett, novelist

"There is no scorn more profound, or on the whole more justifiable, than that of the men who make for the men who explain. Exposition, criticism, appreciation, is work for second-rate minds."

G. H. Hardy, English mathematician

"Where questions of style and exposition are concerned I try to follow a simple maxim: if you can't say it clearly you don't understand it yourself."

John Rogers Searle, American philosopher noted for his contributions to the philosophy of language

“The thing that I like about action sequences is that if they’re done well, you get to know more about the character in those few minutes than you do through ten minutes of exposition.”

David Leitch, director, actor and producer

“I had to push exposition through dialogue, which is really, really hard for an actor do.”

Taylor Sheridan, actor, director and screenwriter

“When Shakespeare begins his exposition thus he generally at first makes people talk about the hero, but keeps the hero himself for some time out of sight, so that we await his entrance with curiosity, and sometimes with anxiety.”

**Andrew Coyle Bradley, better known as A.C. Bradley (1851-1935)
Shakespearean scholar and critic**

“I admire writers such as Elmore Leonard who can nail a character in three or four lines of dialogue, so he doesn’t need pages of back story or clumsy exposition.”

Mark Billingham, crime writer

“I love voiceover. I never understood this idea that it was lazy. Well, yes, there are those movies or TV shows that use it as just a way to get out exposition. But you know what? That’s just bad writing.”

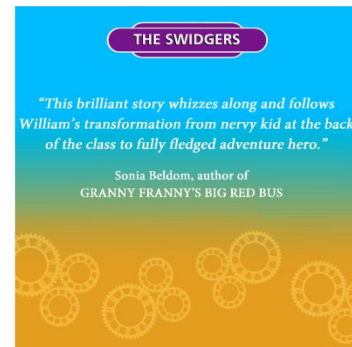
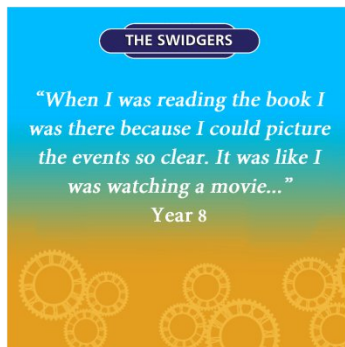
Sam Esmail, American film producer, screenwriter and director

“If your reader has been given a rousing opening, he will usually then sit still for at least some exposition. But be sure to follow that chunk of telling with one or more dramatised scenes. That’s much more effective than being given section after section of telling.”

Nancy Kress, science fiction writer

“I use voiceover just like I use dialogue. There’s a way to give out information or give out insight to the character or give out their worldview, and maybe you have to slip in exposition, but it’s all about how you write it.”

Sam Esmail, producer, screenwriter and director



writing skills

Writing Craft – ‘Show, Don’t Tell’ and ‘Suggest, Don’t Show’

“Fictional discourse constantly alternates between showing us what happened and telling us what happened. The purest form of showing is the quoted speech of characters, in which language exactly mirrors the event (because the event is linguistic). The purest form of telling is authorial summary, in which the conciseness and abstraction of the narrator’s language effaces the particularity and individuality of the characters and their actions. A novel written entirely in the mode of summary would, for this reason, be almost unreadable.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

‘Show, Don’t Tell’

Perhaps ‘The Golden Rule’ across all the storytelling mediums when it comes to any sort of exposition is ‘Show, Don’t Tell’. In written fiction never say someone is ‘sad’ or ‘happy’, for those are adjectives not actions. Instead, give the character a movement or an activity that shows you they are happy or unhappy. For example, it is often said you can ‘tell’ – in the sense of work out for yourself – a

great deal about someone by how they eat. A happy person will not eat in the same way as an unhappy person. So show that way.



But the 'Show, Don't Tell' rule is not as hard and fast as you might think. Even movies (arguably all 'show' in the sense we are seeing the story unfold) sometimes have a voice-over narrator who, by the nature of what it is doing, is essentially a 'teller'. Think here of BRIEF ENCOUNTER, STAND BY ME and APOCALYPSE NOW. And are those films worse off for it? No, not really.

"I had been very impressed with the voiceover of APOCALYPSE NOW, with Martin Sheen's voice. That was a great voiceover; it really internalized the Martin Sheen character, who was essentially fairly low key and didn't say a lot during the whole movie. But he thought a lot, so I always thought that was really great."

Ridley Scott



“Be sure not to discuss your hero’s state of mind. Make it clear from his actions.

Anton Chekhov in a letter to Alexander Chekhov, May 10, 1886

Showing Through Action

Actions, as they say, speak louder than words. And actions *show* better than words, too. In FOR A FEW DOLLARS MORE there’s a scene where a Chinaman enters the bedroom of Colonel Douglas Mortimer (Lee Van Cleef), opens the wardrobe, packs away his clothes and leaves, while the Colonel watches on in silence. The Colonel then puts on his hat and follows the Chinaman downstairs and outside. There to meet him is Manco, the Man with No Name (Clint Eastwood), who says, referring to the bag, “Take it to the station. The gentleman is leaving.” The Colonel then instructs the servant to take it back inside. The Chinaman sensing a shootout drops the bag and runs off. Manco walks round the Colonel and then dirties his boots by rubbing the sole of his own boots on them. The Colonel does the same back. Then it’s a fist from Manco, where the Colonel’s hat falls off, followed by repeated gunshots at the Colonel’s hat every time he tries to pick it up. The Colonel in turn shoots Manco’s hat off his head and uses his next five bullets to keep it dancing in the air. Manco looks very impressed and the next image we see is the two hats side by side next to drinks that the Colonel and Manco are having together. It’s a six minute sequence but no

more than a dozen words or so are spoken. It's a brilliant case of storytelling – or rather story *showing* – through action.



Another famous sequence of storytelling through action is when in *THE GODFATHER* Michael goes to the hospital to protect his father. There are gunmen expected who will when they arrive kill Michael's father, but Michael and an innocent visitor bringing flowers, feign the possession of guns. The gunmen do arrive, see the scene and then leave. Afterwards, Michael lights a cigarette for the terrified friend, whose hands shake with fear. But as he does so, Michael notices that his own hands are steady as a rock. Michael has no fear in this his first real experience of his father's mafia business. And it proves to be a major turning point in the narrative.

GRABBING AND TOSSING THE FLOWERS THAT ENZO IS STILL HOLDING.

MICHAEL: Get rid of these.

MICHAEL: Come 'ere... Put your hand in your pocket like you have a gun. You'll be alright. You'll be okay...

A BLACK CAR PULLS UP TO THE FRONT OF THE HOSPITAL. THE OCCUPANTS LOOK AT MICHAEL AND ENZO, AS MICHAEL UNDOES A

**BUTTON OF HIS COAT AND PUTS HIS HAND IN, AS IF HE HAD A GUN.
THE CAR THEN DRIVES OFF.**

MICHAEL: You did good.

**ENZO, VERY SCARED, TAKES OUT A CIGARETTE AND HAS TROUBLE
LIGHTING IT WITH HIS LIGHTER. HIS HANDS ARE SHAKING. MICHAEL
TAKES THE LIGHTER AND LIGHTS HIS CIGARETTE, NOTICING THAT
HIS HANDS ARE NOT SHAKING.**

**From the screenplay of THE GODFATHER, written by Francis Ford
Coppola and based on the novel by Mario Puzo**

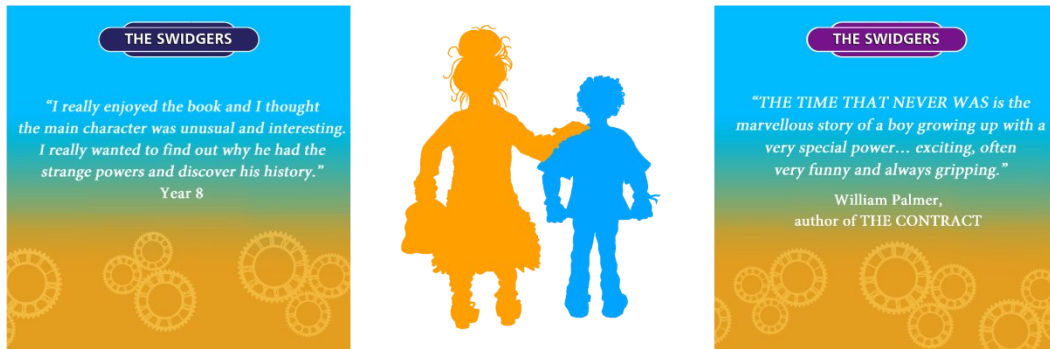


***“Bad writing explains, good writing shows... you don’t have to
know every bit of the vernacular or idioms. You make connections.
Intelligent people can’t watch television because it explains
everything.”***

David Simon, creator of THE WIRE

Suggest, Don’t Show

The concept of ‘Suggest, Don’t Show’ is a rule known particularly to the horror genre. For example, in JAWS we don’t see the shark until well into the film – and when we do it’s a real ‘jump’ moment. Until then the shark has only been suggested, either from a point-of-view camera angle or John Williams’ score or the two together.



In the movie thriller CAT PEOPLE you don't really see the people change into cats, as the physical transformation is mainly only suggested with shadows. This was partly due to costs, as CAT PEOPLE was what was known as a 'B-Movie', and so didn't have the budget for expensive special effects. But its way of suggesting through shadows has now made it a cult classic. In fact there are many examples of 'Suggest, Don't Show' in movies, but perhaps the most famous one is shower scene in PSYCHO. Watch it carefully and you'll notice that no knife actually goes into flesh. There are stabbing motions and blood runs down the drain, but no cuts as such. Yet we wince all the same. That's the power of 'Suggest, Not Show'.

What about plays and theatre? Our word 'obscene' comes from the tradition in classical Greek drama that it was degrading to show extreme emotion or violence on stage. Action therefore had to be implied off stage (*ob skênê*) or reported later by a messenger character. However, Greek theatre did have the *ekkyklêma* or *eccyclema*, a wheeled on platform that came out through a *skênê* that was used to bring interior scenes out into the sight of the

audience. The *eccyclema* was mainly used in tragedies for revealing of dead bodies, the slain children in Euripides' *MEDEA*, for example. A glimpse of the horror, if you like.

You can find a parallel technique to the *eccyclema* in the ghost stories of M.R. James. James hints at the supernatural in his stories, where on the whole everything is kept nuanced and suggested. Well, that is until the end. And then comes the flash of horror that James' writing became so well known for. A classic example of this is in *A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS*:

You don't need to be told that he was dead. His tracks showed that he had run along the side of the battery, had turned sharp round the corner of it, and, small doubt of it, must have dashed straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there. His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits. I only glanced once at his face.

"You do not have to explain every single drop of water contained in a rain barrel. You have to explain one drop—H₂O. The reader will get it."

George Singleton, American author who has written eight collections of short stories, two novels, plus an instructional book on writing fiction



“In virtually every theatre department, economy often equals better art. The fewer the locations, the shorter the time frame, the fewer the characters, the less dialogue, the less scenery, the less everything, the better.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

‘Less is more’

The less you know, the more you will seek to understand. The less you are told, the more you will listen. The less you see, the more you must imagine. Sometimes these are the result of artistic choices, but sometimes they come from necessity.



It's an old adage but a true one and that is that economy often leads to better art. This was certainly the case during the pre-production stage of the musical CANDIDE at the Royal National Theatre in London, when a proposed elaborate set had to be abandoned due to cost. Instead, the designer simply used suitcases and trunks to create each location – and there were many of them – on Candide's long journey. But it was a conceit that worked perfectly, and indeed was highly praised.

“Broadway theatre by no means withstanding, the best production is the least production. The best production takes place in the mind of the beholder.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS



“You always attack a movie scene as late as you possibly can. You always come into the scene at the last possible moment.”

William Goldman, screenwriter

‘In Late, Out early’

William Goldman is famous for the concept of ‘in late, out early’. In practice this means cut all the unnecessary preamble to a scene and come in – that is begin the scene in script terms – only at the point where you absolutely need to. At the end of the scene, avoid all those needless goodbyes and thanks yous and move on the next situation. David Mamet takes this idea even further and suggests that if you want the audience to follow you then if a question or issue is raised in one scene, it is better to have it actually answered in the next.

“A lot of times in movies you want to get out of the scene before the problem is over and have it answered in the next scene, as a

matter of fact. Why? So that the audience will follow you. They, you will remember, want to know what happens next”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM





Writing Craft – Language, Metaphor and Description

Craft Need Not Be the Enemy of Truth

"Literary talent is not enough. If you cannot tell a story, all those beautiful images and subtleties of dialogue that you spent months and months perfecting waste the paper they're written on. What we create for the world, what it demands of us, is story. Now and forever. Countless writers lavish dressy dialogue and manicured descriptions on anorexic yarns and wonder why their scripts never see production, while others with modest literary talent but great storytelling power have the deep pleasure of watching their dreams living in the light of the screen."

Robert McKee, story guru

"No thesaurus can give you those words, no rhyming dictionary. They must happen out of you."

Dorothy Fields, Broadway lyricist

"Why is there only one word for 'thesaurus'?"

Barry Cryer, British comedian

Thoughts on Words, Language and Vocabulary

“The most ordinary word, when put into place, suddenly acquires brilliance. That is the brilliance with which your images must shine.”

Robert Bresson, French film director

“Not a wasted word. This has been a main point to my literary thinking all my life.”

Hunter S. Thompson, American journalist and author

“The Toolbox. Common tools go on top. The commonest of all, the bread of writing, is vocabulary... One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you’re maybe a little ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up a household pet in evening clothes....

You also want grammar on the top shelf of your toolbox.... American grammar doesn’t have the sturdiness of British grammar (a British advertising man with a proper education can make magazine copy for ribbed condoms sound like the Magna goddam Carta), but it has its own scruffy charm.... If your work consists of fragments and floating clauses, the Grammar Police aren’t going to come and take you away.... Language doesn’t always have to wear a tie and lace-up shoes. The object of fiction isn’t grammatical correctness but to make the reader welcome and then tell a story...”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.”

Angela Carter

“Fictional characters are made of words, not flesh; they do not have free will, they do not exercise volition. They are easily born, and as easily killed off.”

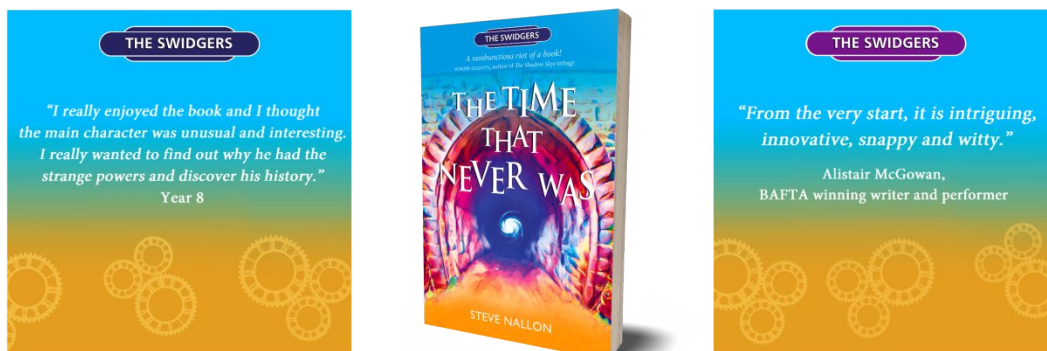
John Banville, Irish novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter

“The material of literary talent is words; the material of story talent is life itself”

Robert McKee

“When you are writing laws you are testing words to find their utmost power. Like spells, they have to make things happen in the real world, and like spells, they only work if people believe in them.”

Hilary Mantel



“English – a nightmare of imprecision for lawmakers and compilers of statute books – is a God-given, double- meaning gift for dramatists. Most things we say to each other can be interpreted two, three or sometimes five ways.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“No matter what you write, it’s a matter of putting words in a certain order so that the reader will be interested in what you’re writing.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“What is tensile strength? It is that all the components are working together. I repeat: You can’t change a single word. The best short stories are built on this premise.”

**Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART
NOT HERE IN LANGUAGE**

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightening.”

Mark Twain

“All writers feel struck by the limitations of language.”

Margaret Atwood

“We writers spend our lives learning how to manipulate language to express precisely what we wish to communicate. Even as I write this, I’m constantly making adjustments to my vocabulary and reconfiguring my sentences so that they accurately deliver on my intentions.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“The person profoundly in love with words may make an excellent poet, composer of crossword puzzles, or Scrabble player; he may write novel-like things which a select group admires; but he will probably not in the end prove a first-rate novelist... Such writers do present characters, actions, and the rest, but becloud them in a mist of beautiful noise, forever getting in the way of what they are saying by their splendour of their way of saying it. Eventually one begins to suspect that the writer has more about his gift than about his characters.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.”

Angela Carter

“The decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE



“Words are but the signs of ideas.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“One sign of the born writer is his gift for finding or (sometimes) inventing authentically interesting language. His sentence rhythms fit what he is saying, rushing along when the story rushes, turning somewhat ponderous to deal with a ponderous character, echoing the thunder of which the story tells, or capturing aurally the wobble of the drunk, the slow, dull pace of the tired old man, the touching silliness of the forty-year-old woman who flirts.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Language is the dress of thought.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“The slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

“Most writers who care in moderately about language don’t go to the extreme of refusing to tell a story at all.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



Thoughts on Adjective and Adverbs...

“I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they’re like dandelions. If you have one in your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day... fifty the day after that... and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it’s—GASP!!—too late.”

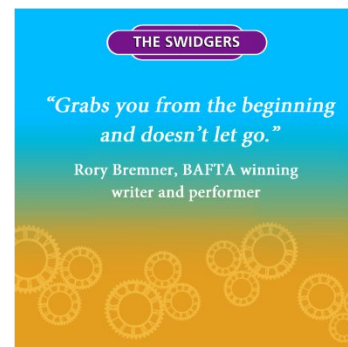
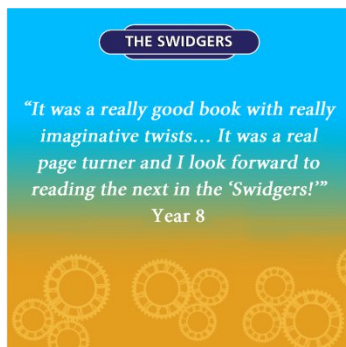
Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Few best-sellers don’t suffer from a spate of adjectives. For when a writer can’t find the nuance of an expression, he usually loads up with adjectives. That tells the reader what to think.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Works of serious purpose and grand promises often have a purple patch or two stitched on, to shine far and wide.”

Horace



Thoughts on Description

“Description is what makes the reader a sensory participant in the story. Good description is a learned skill, one of prime reasons why you cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot....

Description begins with the visualisation of what it is you want the reader to experience. It ends with translating what you seen your mind into words on the page. It's far from easy... Thin description leaves the reader feeling bewildered and nearsighted. Over-description buries him or her in details and images. Trick is to find a happy medium... Description begins with the writer's imagination but should finish in the readers.”

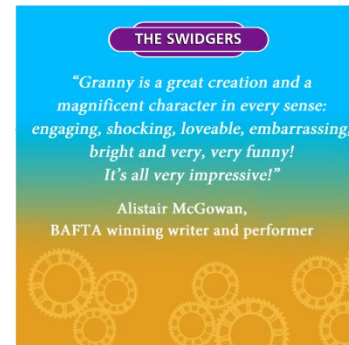
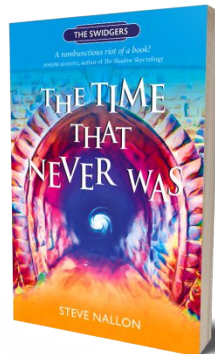
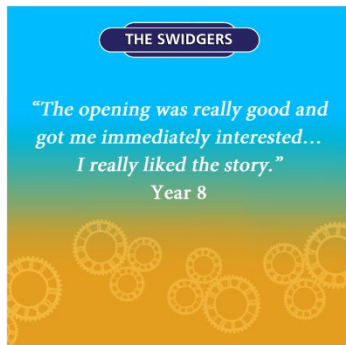
Stephen King, ON WRITING

“I will tell you what Jeanne was like. She was like a piano in a country where everyone has had their hands cut off.”

Angela Carter, SAINTS AND STRANGERS

“The writer sensitive to language find his own metaphor , not simply because he has been taught to avoid clichés but because he finds he enjoys finding an exact and vivid metaphor, one never before thought of, so far as he knows.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



Thoughts on Metaphors and Similes

“A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image, while on the other hand a metaphor which is technically ‘dead’ (e.g. iron resolution) has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

“Metaphor reveals a writer’s true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you have not yet lived much of a life.”

Charlie Devlin

“Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space.”

Orson Scott Card

Thoughts on Grammar and Punctuation

“Punctuation can help delivery... sometimes the speeches are broken up (quite grammatically incorrectly) in order to give an indication to the actor of the preferred delivery.”

Alan Ayckbourn in **THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING**

“When it was time to write, and he took his pen in his hand, he never thought of consequences; he thought of style. I wonder why I ever bothered with sex, he thought; there’s nothing in this breathing world so gratifying as an artfully placed semicolon.”

Hilary Mantel, **A PLACE OF GREATER SAFETY**

“Avoid bracketed directions (when possible).”

Alan Ayckbourn in **THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING**

“Dropping commas is all right except if one’s purpose is to increase the rush of the sentence and thus suggest emotion not justified by what is being said.”

John Gardner, **ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)**

“Many playwrights these days use the sign ‘/’ to denote the interruption point. It’s quite useful.”

Alan Ayckbourn in **THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING**

“I’m more interested in writing interesting sentences than grammatically perfect or beautifully understated ones, and this novel [THE EMPEROR’S BABE] is my most linguistically rebellious and disruptive.”

Bernardine Evaristo **MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP**

“If the necessary information is contained in a script, the viewer will be intelligent enough to understand the abbreviations or the jargon.”

Jonathan Lynn, **COMEDY RULES**

Some General Thoughts on Writing Craft...

“Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“While it is impossible how to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work dedication, and , timely help, to make good writer out of a merely competent one.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Write as if you were a movie camera. Get exactly what is there... getting it down precisely is all that is meant by ‘the accuracy of the writer’s eye’... the writer who sets down exactly what he sees and feels, carefully revising time after time until he fully believes it, noticing when what he’s saying is mere rhetoric or derivative vision, noticing when what he’s said is not noble or impressive but silly – that writer, in so far as the world is just, will outlast Gibraltar.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“What I want most of all is resonance, or something that will linger for a little while in Constant Reader’s mind (and heart) after he or she has closed the book and put it on the shelf.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

““Once there was a farmer who wanted to sell his pig’ leads us to ‘Once there was a farmer who had to sell his pig.’ You will find that the study of semantics, which is the study of how words influence thought and action, will help you immensely as a director.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

“If the writer understands that stories are first and foremost stories, and that the best stories set off a vivid and continuous dream, he can hardly help becoming interested in technique since it is mainly bad technique that breaks the continuousness and checks the growth of the fictional dream.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Is the story coherent? And if it is, what will turn coherence into a song? What are the recurring elements? Do they entwine and make a theme? I’m asking myself, ‘What’s it all about Stevie?’ in other words, and what I can do to make those underlying concerns even clearer.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING



“When a surgeon operates on a young girl, he isn’t saying, ‘I’m going to make an incision on this young lady’s stomach that is not only going to scar her but will a few affect her future sex life to some degree for the next thirty years.’ He just says, ‘Scalpel, nurse,’ and does it. The surgeon is focused on the act, not its reverberations. Novelists are engaged in something analogous. If they start thinking about all the damage they are going to do, they can’t write the book – not if they’re reasonably decent.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to

whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing.

As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse."

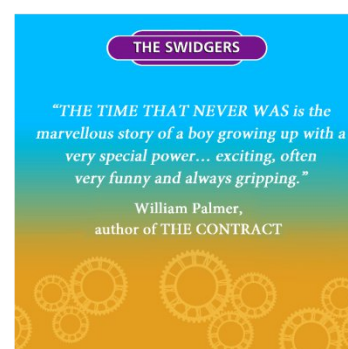
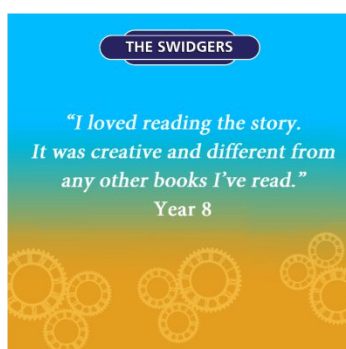
George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

"In a film, it helps to get laughs if you use dialogue that means the same thing in every English-speaking country, or else the context has to be so clear that the meaning can be easily and instantly inferred."

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"In my view, stories and novels consist of three parts: narration, which moves the story from point A to point B and finally to point Z; description, which creates sensory reality for the reader; and dialogue, which brings characters to life through their speech."

Stephen King, ON WRITING





Dialogue and Speech

“In the majority of plays, dialogue generally has to perform a triple function: One, to establish and develop the character. Two, to set the plot running. Three, to include sufficient information to allow the above to happen.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Dialogue

The silver screen silent movies of the 1920s gave way in the 1930s to the very talkative ‘Talkies’. From the moment *THE JAZZ SINGER* hit movie theatres all people wanted to was to see and hear people yapping away, whether it was the clever word play of the Marx Brothers or rapid dialogue exchanges in films such as *HIS GIRL FRIDAY*, which, it has been estimated, has more words per minute than any other film in movie history.

But by the 1940s things had calmed down a bit and conversations on the movie screen were more in tune with real life – except, of course, movie dialogue was heavily censored and regulated by the Hayes Code. Then there’s the storytelling point that movie dialogue, or indeed any dramatic dialogue, be it in a film, on

stage or in a novel, is not like actual conversations in the real world at all.

All story gurus make the same basic observations about the nature dialogue in stories. They start by saying that although dialogue may have the appearance of conversation, it is in fact far from natural speech. Exchange between characters should ideally always carry an *intent* that comes from *motivation* that is itself a result of *want*. This leads to the next point and that is that dialogue and each line itself, should carry an *action*. To borrow David Mamet's phrase, exchanges in dialogue should be '*statements as actions*'. The final point they generally make in respect of dialogue is that sparkling and witty exchanges are all very well, but they should never distract or detract from the narrative line and become greater than the whole.

All these points are valid, but the issue of dialogue doesn't end there. Yes, dialogue ideally is *action in speech*, but it sometimes is also necessary for dialogue to carry basic exposition, be a means of revealing character, and, when the occasion requires, be funny.

A more listener based point about dialogue is that it isn't always that easy to take in, nor is it necessarily the best way to receive story information. On this latter point, screenwriters in particular are taught to make narrative exposition understandable without the need of the spoken word. They are also taught to write the screenplay first and then add the dialogue only at the very end of

the story construction process. Exhaust all other means of expression, especially visual means, before turning to dialogue. You could say then that in screenwriting dialogue should be both the final resource and the last resort.

“Dialogue, then, is a lot more than people just saying things to each other, or even expressing opinions. Through their manner of speech we learn just as much about the character as we do from what they’re telling us.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



“Modern dialogue has the appearance of being naturalistic. But in truth it is a careful construction designed to appear naturalistic. It is nothing of the sort.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Dialogue: The Illusion of Natural Speech

Appearances can be deceptive. And dialogue in drama which is essentially attempting to pass itself off as ordinary conversation, is a good example of a clever but necessary fraud. For dialogue, as all story gurus will tell you, should only ever be the illusion of speech.

When you think about it, there are some obvious differences between the manner in which characters speak on stage or on film,

or even for that matter in a novel, and the way people communicate in ordinary life. For a start, in plays/movies/novels characters tend to say something and the other person replies, whereas in everyday speech this is not necessarily the case. For a start, people in real life tend to interrupt each other far more often than in drama. Certainly there are writers who break up speeches with interruptions (David Mamet is a prime example) but they are still carefully constructed in such a way as to still make them intelligible.



Next there's the point that in actual conversations people don't always answer or reply to what has been said in a logical way. In real exchanges you will often find several, and indeed sometimes many, non-sequiturs. Then there are the issues of private codes, poor grammar, half-starts, false starts and self-corrections, plus the fact that people in real life often speak over each other. You will find all these aspects of actual conversations in transcribed verbatim exchanges, but rarely, however, will you see anything resembling such transcriptions on the pages of a drama, screenplay or novel.

Of course, there are exceptions. For example, the Glaswegian playwright C.P. Taylor used to talk of ‘contrapuntal dialogue’, a point picked up by Stephen Jefferys in his book *PLAYWRITING*:

His play *BREAD AND BUTTER* (produced at the Traverse in 1966) is about two Jewish friends in Glasgow from opposite ends of the class spectrum, meeting over the period between 1931 and 1965 on a park bench, trying to make sense of their lives and the political crisis of the era. They talk in monologues, which only occasionally happened to intersect.

The same point about C.P. Taylor’s dialogue was picked up by Susan Friesner in her article *Select Travails of a Naked Typist: the Plays of C. P. Taylor* in the Volume 9, February 1993 of *NEW THEATRE QUARTERLY*:

As is usually the case with Taylor’s later plays, the structure of *BRING ME SUNSHINE* is complex, with movements backwards and forwards in time, and dialogue often moving into contrapuntal sequences, with a number of conversations going on simultaneously and no-one really listening to anybody else.

You might also include here *WAITING FOR GODOT*, which has several exchanges that are essentially a series of non-sequiturs.

But these plays are something of a rarity. That said, there are those playwrights who seek to capture the rhythms of actual speech and it was Caryl Churchill who introduced the standard typography for interruptions – ‘/’ – into the scripts of her plays to indicate when a line of dialogue should be interrupted by the next line on the page.

This typography is now known as the ‘Churchill slash’ and its use does make the dialogue at least appear more like natural speech.



A word here about LONG DAY’S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT. It’s a long play. Very long. But in a production directed by Jonathan Miller on the West End stage in 1986, Miller introduced a neat trick. He got the actors to constantly speak over each other. True, you couldn’t always tell what was exactly said, but with Jack Lemmon and Bethel Leslie in the lead roles you could certainly work out what was meant. And as a result of this overlapping technique that long day’s journey into night became a great deal shorter – and arguably better.

Some more thoughts on the realness or otherwise of dialogue...

“Good dialogue doesn’t resemble conversation – it presents the illusion of conversation.”

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

“The properties of people and the properties of character have almost nothing to do with each other. They really don’t. I know it

seems like they do because we look alike, but people don't speak in dialogue. Their lives don't unfold in a series of scenes that form a narrative arc."

Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

"Great dialogue, though it may seem realistic, seldom is. It requires artistry, impeccable phrasing, the perfect vocabulary for the character, and the script should sustain a level of wit (whether or not the characters are aware of it) that is not possible in real life."

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

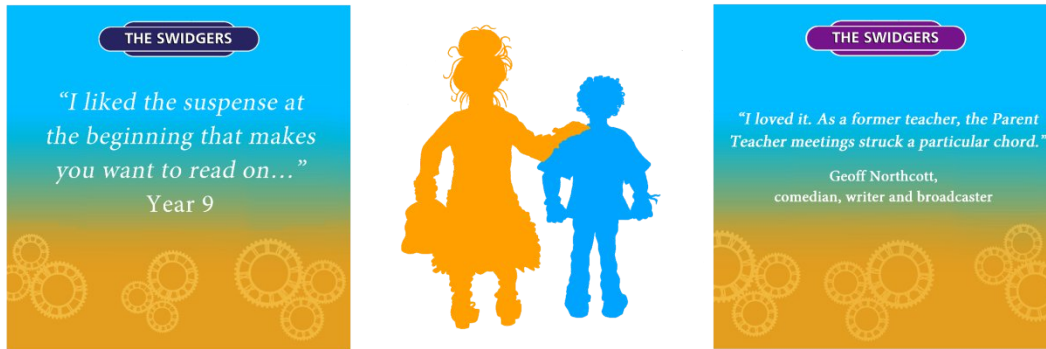


"No glass renders a man's form or likeness so true as his speech."

Ben Jonson, seventeenth century playwright

Differentiation of Speech

The ability to create differences in the way characters speak is an essential skill for the writer. One obvious way to differentiate between characters is through language and choice of words. A character's vocabulary, for example, can reflect their status social, education and even state of mind. Another differentiation can be found in sentence length. Some people are loquacious by nature, others more monosyllabic.



Then there is complexity of speech. Some people think very carefully before they utter word, knowing what they intend to say before they even begin a sentence. As a result, these sentences, though they will have a main clause, are likely to have a series of carefully composed subordinate clauses structured around them. On the other hand, there are those people who rarely think before they speak. What they say may be long or short, but it is unlikely to have the grammatical complexity of the thought-out sentence. Then there are those who speak in a very staccato manner, constantly stopping and starting, while others converse in a more flowing and mellifluous manner. Some good examples of differentiation of speech helping to establish personality can be found in J.K. Rowling's characterisation of Hagrid ("Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' any more, Dursely, don' worry... Gallopin' Gorgons... It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't getting' yer letter but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarets, fer cryin' out loud!") and George Bernard Shaw's portrayal of Eliza Doolittle's father Alfred Doolittle:

DOOLITTLE I'll tell you, Governor, if you'll only let me get a word in. I'm willing to tell you. I'm wanting to tell you. I'm waiting to tell you.

HIGGINS: Pickering, this chap has a certain natural gift of rhetoric. Observe the rhythm of his native woodnotes wild. "I'm willing to tell you: I'm wanting to tell you: I'm waiting to tell you." Sentimental rhetoric! That's the Welsh strain in him. It also accounts for his mendacity and dishonesty.

Unkind and unfair on the Welsh, but that's Higgins' prejudices for you.

Another issue regarding differentiation in speech patterns is the actual style and genre of the play, movie or novel. A fairly obvious point to make here is that a naturalistic play – the so-called 'kitchen sink drama', for example – will have speech patterns and rhythms that are very different, say, to those of characters in Restoration comedies. The construction and style of lines and speeches in Restoration theatre are elaborate and epigrammatic. In plays such as *THE WAY OF THE WORLD* or *THE COUNTRY WIFE*, characters speak in heightened language, and in fact in Restoration theatre lines in performance were addressed as much to the audience as to the other actors on stage. In this sense are in no way 'naturalistic'. And this comedy-of-manners style, as it became to be known, found a new home in the works of Oscar Wilde and later Joe Orton.

Some more thoughts on differentiation of speech in the creation of characters...

“Teenagers and criminals alike use slang as a tribal shibboleth, to distinguish themselves from adult, respectable society. Burgess [in A CLOCKWORK ORANGE] imagines that in the England of the 1970s, youthful delinquents have opted a style of speech heavily influenced by Russian (a conceit that would not have seemed so outlandish in the days of Sputnik as it does now). Alex tells his story to an implied audience of ‘droogs’ (Russian drugi: ‘friends’) in this argot, which is known as a nadsat (the Russian suffix for ‘teen’), though he uses standard English in dialogue with officialdom.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

EXPLANATORY

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary ‘Pike County’ dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech. I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding. THE AUTHOR.

From the preface of THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

‘We made ourselves as snug as our means allowed in the arch of the dresser. I had just fastened our pinafores together, and hung them up for a curtain, when in comes Joseph, on an errand from the stables. He tears down my handiwork, boxes my ears, and croaks:

“‘T’ maister nobbut just buried, and Sabbath not o’ered, und t’ sound o’ t’ gospel still i’ yer lugs, and ye darr be laiking! Shame on ye! sit ye down, ill childer! there’s good books eneugh if ye’ll read ‘em: sit ye down, and think o’ yer sows!”’

From WUTHERING HEIGHTS by Emily Brontë

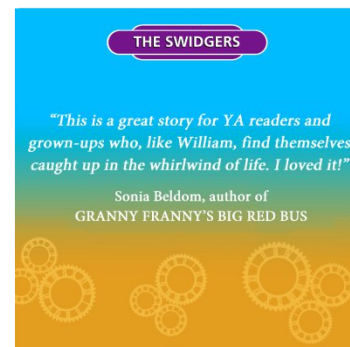
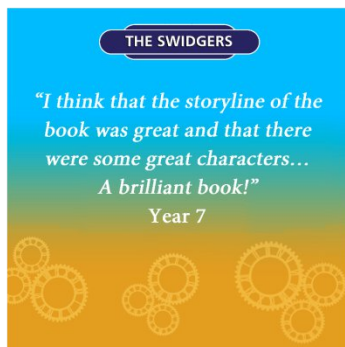


“Dialogue should be character in action.”

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

Want. Motivation. Intention. Action.

The inciting incident triggers the action. The protagonist now wants something and has the motivation of get it. As a result, everything that the protagonist does that follows the inciting incident has an intent. And that includes everything they say. Hence writers speak of ‘statement as action’ (David Mamet) or ‘spoken action’ (Luigi Pirandello).



A word here about Quentin Tarantino’s so-called ‘plotless’ speeches and dialogue. There’s a scene in TRUE ROMANCE where Clifford Worley (Dennis Hopper) wants Vincenzo Coccotti (Christopher Walken) to kill him because Worley knows Coccotti is after his son and will kill him if the son is found, plus Clifford is aware

he would be tortured for the information and then killed anyway. ‘To be shot’ then becomes the intention of the scene. Pretty much everything Clifford Worley says to Vincenzo Coccotti in his rambling speech about the origins of the Sicilians is an insult to Coccotti – and indeed he goes so far in those insults that Vincenzo Coccotti does shoot him in the end. Yes, it’s sprawling and seemingly pointless and plotless, yet, and this is typical of Quentin Tarantino’s screenwriting technique, it is ultimately a causal speech.

“The three most important functions of dialogue characterisation – characterisation, exposition and subtext – are all, as we shall see, products of character desire.”

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS



“It is much easier to write great dialogue (which is a talent and not really very much of an exertion) than to write great plots. So we playwrights do the next best thing to writing great plots: we write bad plots. And then we fill up the empty spaces with verbiage.”

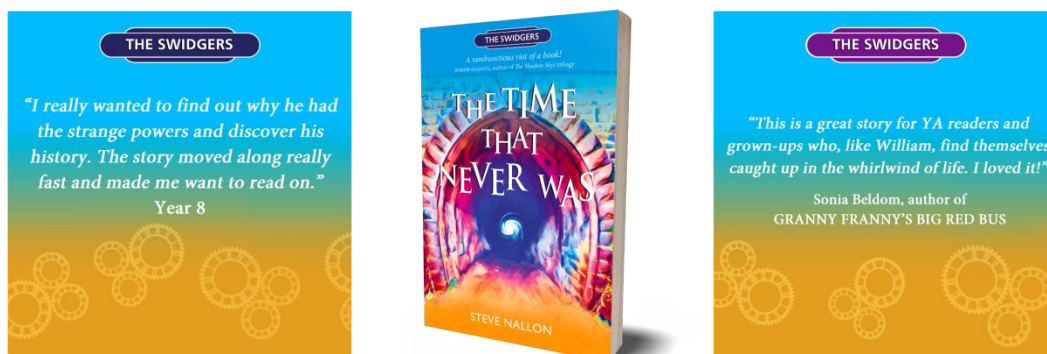
David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

Dialogue’s Place in the Story Hierarchy

Many a novice or newbie screenwriter or playwright askews planning and plotting, and instead starts the writing process with dialogue. This is often because, at least in the case of the would-be

playwright, that they are suspicious of overtly plotted narratives and prefer to develop their story from character. There is also, of course, the practical advantage that beginning with the dialogue saves all that time, effort and hard work of writing out those endless scene breakdowns. But, with all due respect to would-be writers, there is another and less kind word for the novice and newbie – and that is complete amateur.

The point here is that few professional screenwriters or playwrights would ever consider starting the writing process with the dialogue, or even, for that matter, begin to put in dialogue until the story structure itself was already completely in place.



Alan Ayckbourn and Jed Mercurio maybe poles apart in the dramas they produce, plus their work is in completely different mediums, but, interestingly enough, they both have exactly the same attitude to dialogue, and that is they see dialogue as something that is added on later in the writing process:

Dialogue is the least important element of my writing. A lot of new writers spend an inordinate amount of time polishing dialogue to try to fix problems, when the problem is much more likely to lie in the structure or character. (Jed Mercurio)

The dialogue process, for me anyway, takes very little time. Days rather than weeks. But then with all that preparatory work, it really shouldn't take too long. (Alan Ayckbourn)

And both writers would probably echo Alfred Hitchcock who said, "Once the screenplay has been written, and the dialogue has been added, then you can start to shoot."

Some more thoughts on the importance or otherwise of dialogue...

"Dialogue is a necessary evil."

Fred Zinnemann

"Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms. "

Alfred Hitchcock

"Dialogue is not narrative either; it's subservient to the demands of characterisation and structure."

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

"A good film script should be able to do completely without dialogue."

David Mamet

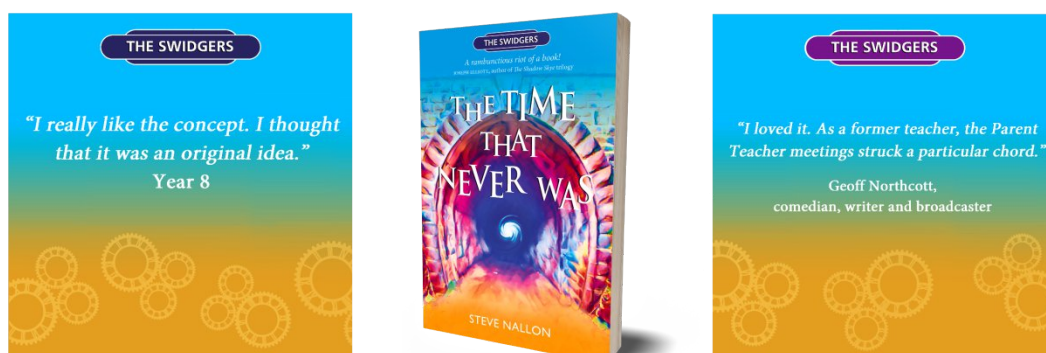


“We guard our inner selves carefully – even sometimes from those we love. In making characters reveal themselves they must be given a cause, a motive. The classic, slightly corny one is to get them drunk. Otherwise, they probably open up through desperation, or anger or deliberately to hurt each other or, most usually, because they have no idea they are doing it.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Evasive Dialogue and Restricting Social Customs

Another device in creating dramatic dialogue is to have one character deliberately withholding information, especially if the audience or reader is aware that information is being deliberately withheld. And the resulting scene could be dramatic or funny, depending on the situation.



Social customs at certain events, settings and locations can often put restrictions on what people are able to say simply because

of the social rules associated with them. ‘Not at the dinner table’, for example, is a line you often hear in dramas when a row develops over a meal in a family home. Terence Rattigan’s *SEPARATE TABLES*, set in a residential hotel, makes excellent use of such restricting social customs in the final act. There’s a lady diner who would like the residents to ostracise a particular resident who she has taken against. However, one by one each of the diners speak with the man. The lady gets visibly angry, but cannot express herself in words because she is so obsessed by her own adherence to table manners. It’s an example of an English comedy-of-manners scene at its very best. And you’ll find in other comedy-of-manners dramas where the social rules of table manners dictate what can be said by characters. Think here of the afternoon tea scene in Oscar Wilde’s *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*, where Cecily and Gwendolen meet for the first time, or the breakfast scene at the end of Noël Coward’s *PRIVATE LIVES*.

“Evasive dialogue. Of course not all dialogue is concerned with the deepest recesses of the character’s soul. There are times when it’s used just spin bridges of confusion. When the truth is concealed by misunderstanding overlapping dialogue.”

Alan Ayckbourn in *THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING*



“I am always flattered and relieved whenever an actor recognises that they’re misquoting the written text – whenever they realise that there is a ‘right’ rhythm to a speech, a correct balance to a line. They’re the ones I tend to work with again.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Rhythm, Weight and Balance

In a ‘suspense sentence’ (sometimes called a ‘period sentence’) the most important word is left until the very end of the sentence, thus delaying its sense and meaning. The Leeds born playwright Alan Bennett points out that for people in the north that is a naturally way to speak and construct a sentence. Put the subject-noun at the end, thus making the listener wait to find out who the sentence is about. “Not had a bad life, having only one arm, our Albert.” And saying it like that gives the sentence its own unique rhythm, weight and balance. Northern speech patterns, as Bennett often points out, are as stylised as any Restoration comedy.



The playwright Alan Ayckbourn in his book THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING spends a lot of time discussing dialogue, particularly rhythm, weight and balance. Ayckbourn observes that dialogue is “a

lot more than people just saying things to each other, or even expressing opinions. Through their manner of speech we learn just as much about the character as we do from what they're telling us."

Ayckbourn even discusses and deconstructs his own work in his book. For example, he analyses this speech by Rowland from THE REVENGERS COMEDIES:

ROLAND: No, no. It's just that ... er ... well, if don't mind my saying so, yours doesn't immediately strike a layman like myself as what we generally think of as a legal brain. Just a first impression."

Ayckbourn writes, "The punchline (well, the key words), 'legal brain', is held back until the very last minute. The sub-clause, 'as what we generally think of', is there to 'weight' the line... The final phrase – 'Just a first impression' – is what I term a 'for nothing' line. It generally gets lost under the laugh you get on 'legal brain'. But by giving it to Roland it leaves him with control of the scene."

You can see by the detailed analysis of just these few lines how much care and attention goes into to every word and the order of every word. Actors particularly enjoy the work of Alan Bennett and Alan Ayckbourn because their sentences and the dialogue they write are so brilliantly constructed. And, of course, this makes them easier to learn. There's a phrase that actors use sometimes and it's 'I can't get off the book', meaning they are still dependent on the written script as they are unable to get the lines in their heads. And this is

often because the lines are badly constructed. But that's not the case with either Bennett or Ayckbourn. As Alan Ayckbourn says in his book *THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING*, "I am always flattered and relieved whenever an actor recognises that they're misquoting the written text – whenever they realise that there is a 'right' rhythm to a speech, a correct balance to a line. They're the ones I tend to work with again." And to understand the correct balance of a line or speech, Ayckbourn recommends that the would-be playwright should read aloud all their work at the drafting stage.

"I was kind of excited about going to jail the first time and I learnt some great dialogue."

Quentin Tarantino



"Good dialogue depends on your ear. There has to be something in each speech that relies on the previous one. But I don't even want to talk about dialogue... I don't think you can teach it."

Norman Mailer, *THE SPOOKY ART*

Skill or Talent?

Stephen Jeffreys in his excellent book *PLAYWRITING STRUCTURE CHARACTER HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE* suggests that the observations concerning conversation in Paul Grice's *STUDIES IN*

THE WAY OF WORDS offers the writer ways of creating appealing and unusual dialogue. Grice noticed that there are certain preconceived rules of conversation and they are now known as 'Gricean Maxims'.

Maxim of Quality: making your contribution to the conversation as informative as is necessary, but not more than is necessary.

Maxim of Quality: not saying what you believe to be false or that for which you have no evidence.

Maxim of Relevance: saying that which is pertinent to the conversation.

Maxim of Manner: being brief and avoiding obscure expressions and ambiguity.

There are as well other social rules around conversation such as 'turn-taking', where you politely wait until the other person has made their contribution, and 'prompting', where if there is a group, and someone hasn't spoken, you may well ask them a question to encourage them to join in. Sometimes too you may deliberately step back and give someone else free reign, and at other times you may decide that what has been said needs correcting in some way and so you feel obligation to speak.

The point of all this for the writer is to create characters who, as it were, break these maxims and rules. Having one character sticking to these social codes and another who does not, will

naturally produce an uneven exchange, but one that is certainly more dynamic.

Another practical method in order to produce dramatic dialogue is to borrow an exercise from Stanislavski. What Stanislavski suggested was to put a verb of intention above the line that you are acting: *to annoy, to confuse, to bring to an end* and so on. Here the purpose is for the actor understand the 'action intent' that is in the line. And the writer could use the principle of that exercise, but do it, as it were, backwards. Write the 'action intent' first and then come up with a line that works for it. In simple terms, the writer should know what the character wants before the line that aims to achieve that want is written. And this is a point, of course, that goes back to David Mamet's 'statement as action' and Luigi Pirandello's 'spoken action'.

"The purpose of dialogue is not to carry information about 'the character'. The only reason people speak is to get what they want."

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



“The writer who wants to learn how to use dialogue in the motion picture should try to make his story understandable without the spoken word. In this way he will learn how to handle the other means of expression to the fullest extent. Later he can set this rule for himself: dialogue should be used when all other means of expression are exhausted and cannot contribute any further. Dialogue should be the last resource. Then it will have its right place.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Unspoken Exchanges

There are ways of creating ‘dialogue’ without words – and the simplest is just think visually. A classic example of this can be found in the breakfast action in CITIZEN KANE. In a series of scenes over time, the exchanges between the newlyweds at breakfast become fewer and fewer, until there is no communication at all, for by the end of the sequence the husband just holds the morning newspaper in front of him to avoid any eye contact. Clearly the marriage has broken down. It’s a montage that says much without saying anything at all. And when Steven Spielberg in JAWS wanted a scene which showed the tension in the family of police chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider), the answer he came up with was a scene where the father tried to play Cat’s Cradle. The awkwardness of this string game certainly suggested there was an unspoken strain within the family unit.

“You can read the dialogue of a stage play and understand the whole action without further explanation. But you could not confine yourself to the reading of the dialogue in a screenplay if you wanted to understand the happenings. The difference is that the dialogue in the stage play is the principal means of expression... Although dialogue is the simplest way for the writer to convey facts not the easiest way for the spectator to receive them. The spoken word is difficult to absorb. One picture is worth a thousand words.”
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



“Long speeches good ways to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of your characters – though having said that, few people set out to make long speeches. The long speech usually emerges as a result of the other character failing to interrupt... or as a result of a character who feels socially uneasy with silence.”
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Long Speeches

A long speech or monologue is not a soliloquy, for a soliloquy is essentially internal thought when the character is alone. Any speech, be it long or short, is usually addressed to someone and that character will, as they listen to the speech, react to what is said, even if they don't speak themselves. Shakes of the head. Folding arms in a defensive way. Crossing fingers in an encouraging way. All are visual

reactions. And the point here is that visual interchange and interaction should be built into the speech itself. A long speech, therefore, can, in its own way, result in great dialogue.

“A song in a musical works best when a character has to sing – when words won’t do the trick anymore. The same idea applies to a long speech in a play or a movie or on television. You want to force the character out of a conversational pattern.”

Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter



“Reaction shots... The reaction of other characters or bystanders are the same as the audience’s reaction would be. It’s another aspect of owning up. These reaction shots give the audience permission to laugh.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

The Watcher

John Cleese has said that the key to making Basil Fawlty’s antics in FAWLTY TOWERS funny was to have another character, usually Sybil, watching his insane behaviour with a deadpan face, meaning no movement of expression. Someone behaving insanely – *not funny*, but someone watching someone behaving insanely, *very*

funny. Especially with the contrast between the physical dynamics of each.

The device of the ‘watcher’ can also be applied to dialogue. And in comedy movies in particular that ‘watcher’ is often a dog. How many times have we seen a heated discussion between two characters that ends with a cutaway of a cute dog with a puzzled face, who has clearly been staring at them throughout.



Then there is the watcher who is given the ‘topper line’ that ends the scene. And this as often as is what get the biggest laugh. A famous example of a ‘topper line’ can be found in *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY*, where in a public restaurant Sally has been proving to Harry a woman can fake orgasmic pleasure. Immediately after Sally has peaked there’s a cutaway to another couple and the woman says to the waiter, “I’ll have what she’s having.”



Some more thoughts on dialogue...

“A conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue. That’s why there are so few good conversations: due to scarcity, two intelligent talkers seldom meet.”

Truman Capote

“The subject matter of the show, CABARET, was more than risky. And the emcee I would be playing didn’t have a single line of dialogue. Still, it was full of possibilities, and it was mine. ”

Joel Grey

“Discover everything about your characters that you can before you write your story. If you get stuck at any point, they will write your dialogue for you.”

Michael J. Kannengieser, THE DADDY ROCK

“Dialogue, put simply, is characters conveying information verbally – about themselves, about each other, about events.”

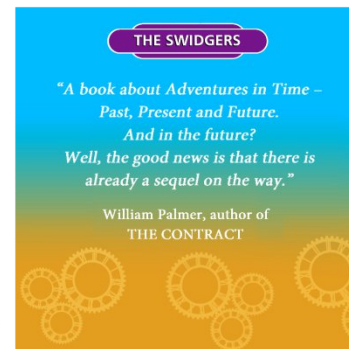
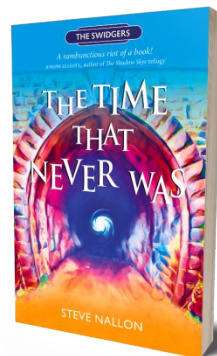
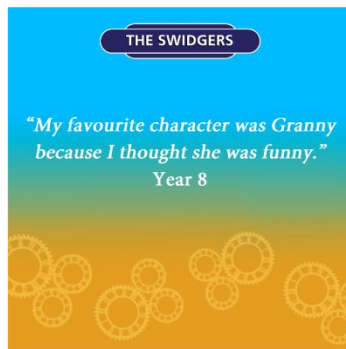
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Nabokov, who I loved more than any other writer when I was young, had such contempt for dialogue. When I was younger, I never wrote a word of dialogue because of him. I thought it was a childish part of a novel. ”

Zadie Smith

“I’ve found that good dialogue tells you not only what people are saying or how they’re communicating but it tells you a great deal – by dialect and tone, content and circumstance – about the quality of the character. ”

E. O. Wilson





Sub-text and Secondary Meanings

‘Small talk – a lot of small talk with quite different thoughts going on behind it’.

Vicky in Noël Coward’s SHADOW PLAY

This famous line is often said to be the essence of the Noël Coward style and to a certain degree it is. Coward certainly uses the ‘small talk’ of social interaction to cover up underlying frictions and emotions. However, it is wrong to think that the talk is always ‘small’ in the sense that it is always just polite conversation, for sometimes, though the surface talk seems inconsequential, what matters is what is going on underneath. Behind the scenes, as it were. With Coward’s dialogue it is important to ask what is it that the characters are trying to hide or conceal, or indeed make known in a coded way, for the Coward style, a variation of comedy-of-manners, involves both masking and revealing at the same time. And that’s a real challenge.

It is worth noting that Noël Coward often starred in and directed productions of his own plays. The concern as to whether or not an actor would get the true intent of a line is perhaps not so much a worry if the writer is also the director and your fellow

performer on stage with you every night. But of course the actor working with Coward would have to have had the intelligence to understand the Coward style and the skills to put it into practice.



Sometimes with Coward actors don't always realise how subtle they are being. They think that because they are thinking of a sub-text that it will somehow automatically manifest itself in performance and be picked up or understood by the audience. However, this is not always the case. In comedy-of-manners, therefore, there has to be a delicate balance between making specific and making obvious. Which lines have no sub-text, and so can be played 'straight-down-the-line', or 'on the line' as most actors call it, and which need a thought action that is contrary or even contradictory to the line. And contradictory sub-text is sometimes a major problem for actors dealing with Coward. Actors call it 'betraying the line' and in psychology it is referred to as 'non-verbal leakage'.

A classic example of betraying the line can be found in the balcony scene from PRIVATE LIVES. Former lovers Amanda and Elyot

by a fluke of fate find themselves in adjoining rooms in a hotel in the south of France, both on their honeymoon with new spouses. They claim to be in love with their new partners but it soon becomes clear this is not the case:

AMANDA: And yet here we are starting afresh with to quite different people. In love all over again, aren't we. (*ELYOT doesn't answer.*) Aren't we?

ELYOT: No.

Amanda and Elyot then agree that they won't talk about themselves anymore – "we'll talk about outside things," says Amanda, "anything you like, only don't leave me until I've pulled myself together." They begin a conversation about travelling, inconsequential small talk, but that emotional need must always be there just under the surface of every word:

AMANDA: China must be very interesting.

ELYOT: Very big, China.

AMANDA: And Japan –

ELYOT: Very small.

AMANDA: Did you eat shark's fins, and take your shoes off, and use chopsticks and everything?

ELYOT: Practically everything.

AMANDA: And India, the burning Ghars, or Ghats, or whatever they are, and the Taj Maha. How was the Taj Mahal?

ELYOT: (*looking at her*) Unbelievable, a sort of dream.

AMANDA: That was the moonlight I expect, you must have seen it in the moonlight.

ELYOT: (*Never taking his eyes off her*) Yes, moonlight is cruelly deceptive.

AMANDA: And it didn't look like a biscuit box did it? I've always felt that it might.

ELYOT: Darling, I love you.

AMANDA: And I do you met a sacred Elephant. They're lint white I believe, and very, very sweet.

ELYOT: I've never loved anyone else for an instant.

And getting this sort of scene right for the actor isn't just about being 'clipped', a vocal delivery style common in the 1930s. A powerful and sexual undercurrent contradicting the surface words must always be running through every syllable that is spoken.

A key difference with the sub-text in the scene from *SHADOW PLAY* is that because it is happening within the context of a dream or memory, Vicky can sometimes step out of herself and reveal the sub-text behind a line:

SIMON: Well – here we are.

VICKY: The first time – we knew at once, didn't we? Don't you remember how we discussed it afterwards?

SIMON: I saw you in the ballroom – I wondered who you were.

VICKY: My name's Victoria – Victoria Marden.

SIMON: Mine's Simon Gayforth.

VICKY: How do you do?

SIMON: Quite well, thank you.

VICKY: I suppose you came down from London for the dance?

SIMON: Yes, I'm staying with the Bursbys –

VICKY: What do you do?

SIMON: I'm in a bank.

VICKY: High up in a bank? Or just sitting in a cage totting up things?

SIMON: Oh, quite high up really – it's a very good bank.

VICKY: I'm so glad.

SIMON: How lovely you are.

VICKY: No, no, that came later – you've skipped some.

SIMON: Sorry.

VICKY: You're nice and thin – your eyes are funny – you move easily – I'm afraid you're terribly attractive.

SIMON: You never said that.

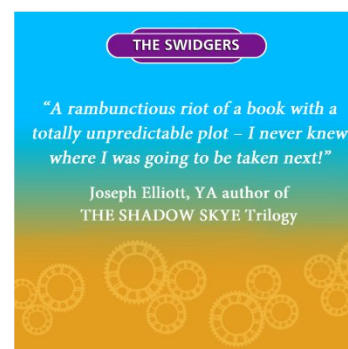
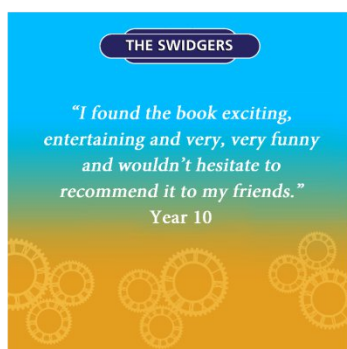
VICKY: No, but I thought it.

SIMON: Stick to the script.

VICKY: Small talk – a lot of small talk with quite different thoughts going on behind it – this garden's really beautiful – are you good at gardens?

SIMON: No, but I'm persevering.

And it's because it's part memory that Vicky is able to comment on the action of her own exchange when she says, "Small talk – a lot of small talk with quite different thoughts going on behind it." The acting technique that is required here is the ability to change in mid-flow from an unknowing state of mind to a knowing and reflective state of mind. And this involves the acting technique that actors often refer to as 'spinning on a sixpence'.



SHADOW PLAY was written in the 1930s and strict codes of social behaviour are no longer as strict as they were and so many actors today are not familiar with such over-politeness and rules of etiquette. That said, small talk is still part of the English culture, particularly when the English talk about the weather, much to the amusement of visiting Americans.



However, things are changing and the mores of Coward's world are quickly disappearing. In fact, some would say they have in truth long gone. For example, the social codes required for a weekend house party, the etiquette so central to HAY FEVER, is certainly unknown nowadays to audiences, except perhaps through watching DOWNTON ABBEY. And even in Coward's day it would have been limited to a small and very specific social group. That is not to say, of course, that plays requiring extinct social codes cannot be performed. It's just that for plays that require an understanding of lost social behaviour, special effort must be made to establish exactly how those codes operated.

Sub-text is not specific or exclusive to Coward. Others use it in a different context or style. But in some ways the British playwright who owed a great debt to Coward, but is not often thought of in those terms, is Harold Pinter. The sub-text with Pinter is more often an undercurrent of violence than repressed emotional fragility but it is sub-text nevertheless. Without sub-textual playing a Pinter play would be completely unrecognisable. And it is no co-incidence that when Pinter was asked to make his debut at the National Theatre as a director, and told he could choose any play, he went for Coward's BLITHE SPIRIT.

"The past is what you remember, imagine you remember, convince yourself you remember, or pretend you remember."

Harold Pinter



"The text has disappeared under the interpretation."

Friedrich Nietzsche, BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

The Case Against Sub-text

John Yorke in his book INTO THE WOODS mentions a former senior figure in BBC drama who disliked sub-text and only wanted scripts that were 'on the nose', as writers say. He argued that viewers didn't always get subtleties of sub-text – and so all sub-text

had to go. Writers saw their scripts bleached out to become nothing but the pure obvious. Writers who had carefully created scenes so that they had to be played with a sub-textual understanding had them sent back for re-writes as this particular drama head couldn't understand what was going on. Yorke mentions no names but anyone who has worked in television drama knew exactly who he was talking about.

This anecdotal history of BBC drama perhaps explains the pervading use in series and plays today of 'on-the-nose' or 'on-the-line' dialogue, where nothing is left unsaid in words and what is said is delivered often in an overstated manner. There is nothing wrong with drama that is 'raw' and 'visceral', two words often found describing the new and exciting fringe plays, but not when there is only the raw and the visceral.

"I'm not gonna ask you if you just said what I think you just said because I know it's what you just said."

Agent Dana Scully in THE X-FILES



BARTON KEYES (played by Edward G. Robinson: This Dietrichson business. It's murder, and murders don't come any neater. As fancy a piece of homicide as anybody ever ran into. Smart, tricky, almost perfect, but... I think Papa has it all figured out. It's beginning to come apart at the seams already.

Barton Keyes, played by Edward G. Robinson, in the movie DOUBLE INDEMNITY Directed by Billy Wilder and written by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler, based on a novella by James M. Cain

Secondary Meanings

In the movie DOUBLE INDEMNITY there's a conversation between Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), a sexually frustrated but married woman, and Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), a salesman who has called to discuss an insurance policy:

PHYLLIS: Mr. Neff, why don't you drop by tomorrow evening about eight-thirty. He'll be in then.

WALTER NEFF: Who?

PHYLLIS: My husband. You were anxious to talk to him weren't you?

WALTER NEFF: Yeah, I was, but I'm sort of getting over the idea, if you know what I mean.

PHYLLIS: There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles an hour.

WALTER NEFF: How fast was I going, officer?

PHYLLIS: I'd say around ninety.

WALTER NEFF: Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket.

PHYLLIS: Suppose I let you off with a warning this time.

WALTER NEFF: Suppose it doesn't take.

PHYLLIS: Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles.

WALTER NEFF: Suppose I burst out crying and put my head on your shoulder.

PHYLLIS: Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder.

WALTER NEFF: That tears it.

Whatever this scene is about it's certainly not speeding. At least not in cars.

Phyllis Dietrichson is the *femme fatale* in this *film noir* who seduces and dupes Fred Murray. But movies of the period could not risk being overtly sexual, as to much explicit sex, even just in dialogue, would break the Hays Code. The Hays Code was named after William H. Hays who was the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in the 1930s and the code contained the industry guidelines for motion pictures released between 1934 and 1968. Its rules prohibited profanity, explicit dialogue, suggestive nudity, sexual perversion and excessive violence. The code meant in practice that even married couples were only ever seen sleeping in separate beds. And so a direct sexual proposition would have been out of the question. Hence the use of sub-text. Walter is making a sexual proposition to Phyllis, but it's sub-textual. And the code could hardly argue with sub-text, because sub-text is rarely written into the text itself. It's there as plain as day, but only in performance.

Here's a similar sub-textual exchange from in *THE BIG SLEEP* between Marlow (Humphrey Bogart) and Vivian (Lauren Bacall):

VIVIAN: Speaking of horses, I like to play them myself. But I like to see them workout a little first, see if they're front

runners or come from behind, find out what their hole card is, what makes them run.

MARLOWE: Find out mine?

VIVIAN: I think so.

MARLOWE: Go ahead.

VIVIAN: I'd say you don't like to be rated. You like to get out in front, open up a little lead, take a little breather in the backstretch, and then come home free.

MARLOWE: You don't like to be rated yourself.

VIVIAN: I haven't met anyone yet that can do it. Any suggestions?

MARLOWE: Well, I can't tell till I've seen you over a distance of ground. You've got a touch of class, but I don't know how, how far you can go.

VIVIAN: A lot depends on who's in the saddle.

"Under those blue pyjamas was a shape to set a man nuts."

From the novel DOUBLE INDEMNITY by James M. Cain



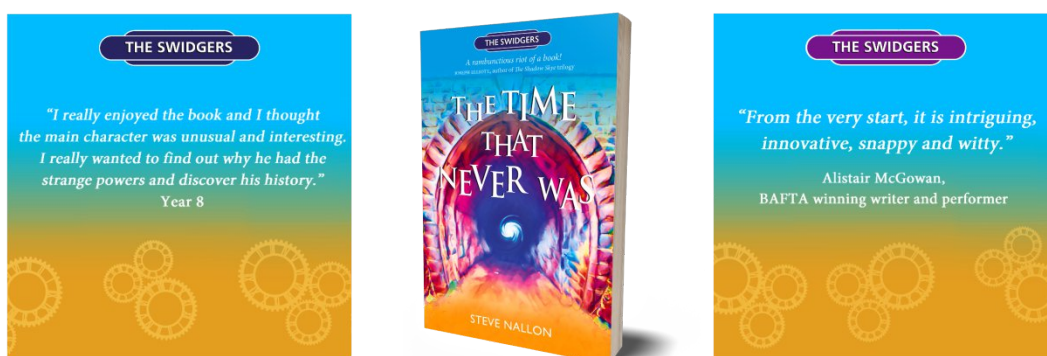
***'If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
if you pardon, we will mend:
And, as I am an honest Puck,***

*If we have unearned luck
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call;
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.'*

Puck's speech from A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, Act V, scene ii, line beginning 56

Secondary Text as Sub-text

In DEAD POET'S SOCIETY Neil, a young student, wants to be an actor but his father is opposed to this and wants his son to go to medical school. Against his father's wishes Neil takes on the role of Puck in his school's production of A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM. Neil sees his disapproving father at the back of the school hall and as Puck, Neil addresses the speech straight to him, beginning with line: "If we shadows have offended..."



Rosalind's speech from AS YOU LIKE IT ("No sooner had they met but they looked; no sooner looked but they loved; no sooner loved but they sighed...") is also used by Josie as a way of conveying a

secondary meaning in NEVER BEEN KISSED. And it works too, because the guy then wants to take her to the prom. Sub-textual intent achieved.

'O! I know where you are. Nay, 'tis true: there was never anything so sudden but the fight of two rams, Caesar's thrasonical brag of 'I came, saw, and overcame:' for your brother and my sister no sooner met, but they looked; no sooner looked but they loved; no sooner loved but they sighed; no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason; no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy: and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage which they will climb incontinent, or else be incontinent before marriage. They are in the very wrath of love, and they will together: clubs cannot part them.'

Rosalind's speech from AS YOU LIKE IT, Act V, scene ii, beginning line 15



ABBOTT: I say Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third.

COSTELLO: Are you the manager?

ABBOTT: Yes.

COSTELLO: You gonna be the coach too?

ABBOTT: Yes.

COSTELLO: And you don't know the fellows' names?

ABBOTT: Well I should.

COSTELLO: Well then who's on first?

ABBOTT: Yes.

COSTELLO: I mean the fellow's name.

ABBOTT: Who.

COSTELLO: The guy on first.

ABBOTT: Who.

COSTELLO: The first baseman.

ABBOTT: Who.

COSTELLO: The guy playing...

ABBOTT: Who is on first!

COSTELLO: I'm asking YOU who's on first.

ABBOTT: That's the man's name.

COSTELLO: That's who's name?

ABBOTT: Yes.

COSTELLO: Well go ahead and tell me.

ABBOTT: That's it.

COSTELLO: That's who?

ABBOTT: Yes.

The famous 'Who's on First?' routine of Abbott and Costello

Conversations Understood as Having Two Different Meanings

It's possible in dialogue to have two very different conversations happening at the same time, where one person believes they are talking about one thing, but the other thinks they are talking about something else entirely. The famous '*Who's on First?*' routine of Abbott and Costello is a comedic example of this. Abbott says that Who, What and I Don't Know are the names of players in baseball and Who, the player, is on first base. But Costello doesn't quite take this in and for him 'Who' is not a name but the start of a question. And the difference in these perceptions is what

comedy writers refer to as the 'Comic Gap'. And of course words can be misheard or misunderstood.

An example of the Comic Gap can be found in a short exchange in the movie *BIG*, where unknown to Susan (Elizabeth Perkins), Josh (Tom Hanks) is really a pre-adolescent boy in man's body. The scene takes place at Josh's apartment and it's getting late:

SUSAN: I'm not so sure we should do this.

JOSH: Do what?

SUSAN: Well, I like you, and I want to spend the night with you.

JOSH: Do you mean sleep over?

SUSAN: Well, yeah.

JOSH: Okay... but I get to be on top.

Josh means the bunk bed but Susan initially takes it to have a sexual connotation.

Arguable the most famous scene in Restoration comedy is 'the china scene' from *THE COUNTRY WIFE*, written by William Wycherley and first performed in 1675. The scene depends on sustained double entendre dialogue, where Horner is purportedly discussing his china collection with two of his lady friends. Horner's 'china' however is code for his sexual capacity, prowess and indeed his private parts. The husband of Lady Fidget and the grandmother of Mrs. Squeamish, Lady Squeamish, listen to the conversation and nod their approval, failing to pick up the true meaning of Horner's 'china', which is obvious to the audience. Lady Fidget has already explained to her

husband that Horner "knows china very well, and has himself very good, but will not let me see it, lest I should beg some. But I will find it out, and have what I came for yet." Dialogue such as this made 'china' a dirty word in common conversation in seventh-century London, Wycherley claimed later.

RE-ENTER LADY FIDGET WITH A PIECE OF CHINA IN HER HAND, AND HORNER FOLLOWING.

LADY FIDGET: *And I have been toiling and moiling for the prettiest piece of china, my dear.*

HORNER: *Nay, she has been too hard for me, do what I could.*

Mrs. Squeamish. *Oh, lord, I'll have some china too. Good Mr. Horner, don't think to give other people china, and me none; come in with me too.*

HORNER: *Upon my honour, I have none left now.*

Mrs. Squeam. *Nay, nay, I have known you deny your china before now, but you shan't put me off so. Come.*

HORNER: *This lady had the last there.*

LADY FIDGET: *Yes indeed, madam, to my certain knowledge, he has no more left.*

Mrs. Squeam. *O, but it may be he may have some you could not find.*

LADY FIDGET: *What, d'ye think if he had had any left, I would not have had it too? for we women of quality never think we have china enough.*

HORNER: *Do not take it ill, I cannot make china for you all, but I will have a roll-waggon for you too, another time.*

Mrs. Squeam. *Thank you, dear toad.*

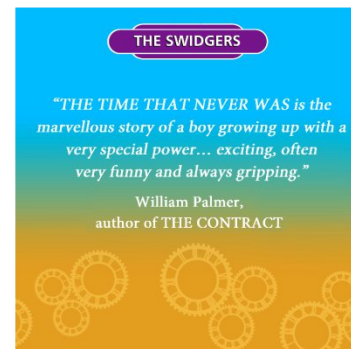
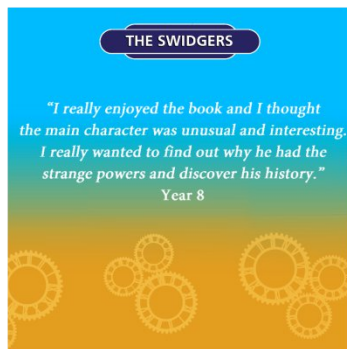
LADY FIDGET: *What do you mean by that promise? [Aside to HORNER.*

HORNER: *Alas, she has an innocent, literal understanding. [Aside to Lady Fidget.*

Lady Squeamish: Poor Mr. Horner! he has enough to do to please you all, I see.

HORNER: Ay, madam, you see how they use me.

From THE COUNTRY WIFE by William Wycherley





Making the Story Make Sense

“The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense.”

Tom Clancy, novelist THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER (1984), PATRIOT GAMES (1987) and CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER (1989)

Making the Story Make Sense

When we say a story should make sense what we’re talking about primarily is story logic, meaning, in simple terms, does it ‘add up’, ‘hang together’ and follow through on its own rules? The story can be about aliens living in your radiator or a supernatural being that has moved in with your grandma. No matter, let it be as fantastical as you like, but the story has to keep within the parameters and rationale that it itself sets out. There must be no contradictions and nothing incongruent or incompatible with that which has been established.

Writers worry about what are known as ‘plot holes’. Essentially plot holes are some kind of mistake made in the plot construction of

the story. And ‘plot hole’ is a great term because in life it’s holes that people often fall down, and if the script has an inconsistency or worse an impossibility built into the action, then that is the hole your story will fall. And if your story logic collapses, well, its fictionality becomes plain for all to see – it’s artifice becomes exposed and you simply stop believing in it.



The practical questions then that need to be asked are: *Where are the plot holes? And are fixable? Is there a flaw in the logic of how the narrative progresses? Is it clear why people do what they do? Are characters in possession of the right information in order to say what they say or know what they know?*

And story logic and making sense applies to character consistency as well as plot. If, for example, your character is honest, don't suddenly make them a pathological liar, for when a character starts going against the grain of recognisable and established behaviour, readers and audiences notice. If a character's actions suddenly become unfathomable, the question to ask is how and

when do you make it clear why there has been a change in behaviour?

The unspoken issue here is that people, especially critics, like to find fault. Of course, if your story is professionally published, it's likely to have an editor whose job it is to spot plot mistakes or character inconsistencies. It isn't unknown, for example, for the editor to point out that the character was wearing green coat when they arrived but inexplicably a red one when they left. Nor that characters who suddenly make a reappearance in a book on page 558 were actually killed off in chapter four. It happens because writers sometimes simply forget what they've written.

Some people like being nitpickers. That's just the way they are. And editors by their nature are such creatures. So perhaps the best advice is find a nitpicker – or better still a professional editor – and give them your story with the strict instructions to nitpick away.

All that said, there are movies and stories that even with their flaws and plot holes remain popular and well-loved. And for some fans, pointing out a story's illogicality or inconsistency becomes part of why they love them. When the nerdy Chris in FAMILY GUY says of THE LORD OF THE RINGS, "Why didn't they fly the eagle to Mordor instead of spending three movies walking there?" His friend replies, "It's not what it's about, Chris. It's about the quest". Story purpose in THE LORD OF THE RINGS trumps Story logic.



Be warned too about actors who say 'My character would never say that.' As the screenwriter Jack Rosenthal said at a read-through when challenged in this way, 'You might not say that, but you're not the character. You're an actor playing this character, who *would* say that. I know, because I wrote her.' And woe betide anyone who points out flaws in the *Harry Potter* books, for J.K. Rowling knows her magical world so well, she'll eat your soul faster than any Dementor.

But for fun, here are a few well-known plot holes to ponder:

How does Andy in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION get the poster back on the wall after he's climbed through the wall behind it?

In THE WIZARD OF OZ it is said that all Dorothy had to do to go home was tap her ruby slippers, but she wouldn't have believed it. Really? In a world of Munchkins, people made of straw and tin with singing lions in toe, Dorothy wouldn't have believed something as simple as that?

In CITIZEN KANE, if on his deathbed Charles Foster Kane was all alone, who heard him say "Rosebud"?

Who killed the chauffeur Owen Taylor in the movie THE BIG SLEEP? – It was reported that during filming director Howard Hawks spotted this apparent flaw and so contacted the author Raymond Chandler on this question and he replied, “Damned if I know.”

Questions abound about STAR WARS plot holes – *Why, for examples, does Obi-Wan Kenobi not recognise R2-D2? How is it that Anakin can sense that Luke is his child, but not Leia? And does Anakin Skywalker have an actual father or is he the result of a miracle virgin birth?*



Even Charles Dickens does not escape criticism. In A CHRISTMAS CAROL it is established that the Ghost of Christmas Past is the spirit of Scrooge’s past, which is to say the past of Scrooge’s younger self and what he was witness to. His memories, in other words. And this story logic is kept to until the final scene in Stave Two where Scrooge is taken to the home of Belle, with whom he was once engaged. But this breaks the story logic of the Ghost of Christmas Past being, as he says himself, the spirit of “your past”, for

this is a scene of which Scrooge has no memory because he could never have witnessed it.



The big get out from all these anomalies and puzzles is '*It's just a story!*' and in a way you can't argue with that. Plus, you may ask these sorts of questions when you've read the book six times or seen the movie every year as part of birthday ritual, but who thinks like that on a first read or first viewing. As Raymond Chandler might have said, "Damned if I know."

"There is always a trade-off of fiction between the achievement of structure, pattern and closure on the one hand, and the imitation of life's randomness, inconsequentiality and openness on the other."

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)



“First, the story must be understood. The novice is inclined to forget this necessity in his enthusiasm. He concentrates upon the things he wishes to express, the emotions he wants to arouse, the messages he has to deliver, and he is liable to forget that none of his desires will be fulfilled unless the story is understood. The spectator cannot believe in a story, he cannot experience fear or hope, terror, or joy, he cannot feel sympathy or aversion, and he cannot be moved to relief or anguish unless he understands the story... If he proceeds without regard for clarity, he must be aware that the emotional responses of the audience will be proportionately weakened by the degree of the obscurity.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Understandability

‘I had no idea what was going on. Could you follow it? I couldn’t!’

A familiar experience after leaving a cinema or theatre? Yes, and all too often nowadays. And it can be a problem when reading a book, as well. If the intension is that the story being told or presented should be comprehensible (which, it is fair to say, is not always the purpose of every writer or dramatist) then the first rule should be that the one experiencing the tale – reader, viewer or listener – must be able to work out what the heck is going on. A story, in other words, should be comprehensible.

But that is not always as easy as it sounds. Especially in a mystery tale. It’s partly a question of balance. Yes, you want a reader to be curious and intrigued, but not at the expense of getting lost in

a labyrinth of complexity. You mustn't hold back too much, yet at the same time it's important not to give away too much. As Eugene Vale says in his seminal 1944 book about the experience of going to the movies, "At one extreme, [audiences] may grasp a 'telegraphed' story point sooner than the writer would like and hoot at its arrival. At the other extreme, they may be mystified by opaque films or incomprehensible sequences that reflect either a surrealist filmmaker's sincere intent or a charlatan's fear that his shallowness might be seen too plainly if he were clearly understood."



Vale goes on to point out that the motion picture, as he calls it, is a medium that requires the audience to, as it were, fill in the gaps, but of course, his general observation about understandability and comprehensibility applies across all the narrative mediums. And that principle incorporates and applies not just story information but arguably to style too. You don't want someone reading a book saying

'It was all so plodding and predictable' or indeed 'It was so weirdly written I couldn't follow a damn word of it.'

"Understandability is particularly important in the motion picture because it shows us only parts of the story in accordance with the selection of information; it banks upon our ability to supply, understand and anticipate the missing parts."

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



"As William of Occam told us, when we have two theories, each of which adequately describes a phenomenon, always pick the simpler. Which is a different way of 'Keeping it Simple, Stupid.' ... Now, we have two plans here. Which is simpler? Always do things the least interesting way, and you make a better movie. That is my experience. Always do the least interesting way, the most blunt way. Because then you will not stand the risk of falling afoul of the objective in the scene by being interesting, which will always bore the audience, who are collectively much smarter than you and me and have already gotten to the punch line."

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

'Keep It Simple, Stupid'

'Keep It Simple, Stupid' (K.I.S.S.) is a principle of design which says that systems should be put together as simply as possible. It's originally a US Navy term thought to have been coined by Kelly

Johnson, an engineer, who said designs should be kept straightforward enough to be repaired by a man in a combat situation with only basic training and simple tools. But how does all this apply to writing skills?

Well, a basic point to make is: *Don't complicate your story with too much detail.* Facts are great, but too much information, particularly historical background or biographical details of real people, can get in the way of the narrative. To paraphrase Noel Coward, '*Don't put your research on the stage/page/screen, Mrs Worthing. Don't put your research on the stage/page/screen.*'

And it's worth mentioning here incomprehensible technical or scientific data. In DOCTOR WHO, the Doctor sometimes takes the K.I.S.S. rule to heart, especially when she begins with a Time Lord explanation for some phenomena or other, then realises mid-flow that no one is understanding a word he's saying, so he or she stops in mid-flow and tries with something simpler – "The life force of the whole forest has transmuted itself into a sub-etheric waveband of light, which can exist as a... (STOPS AND RECONSIDERS) The souls of the trees are out among the stars, and they're shining, very happy."



Another basic point to make about the principle of K.I.S.S. concerns character motivation. Keep why they are doing what they are doing as clear and as straightforward as possible, unless, of course, the intention of the drama or fiction is to explore, for example, the complexity of decision making itself. That said, if an audience is to walk with, as it were, the protagonist through the story, it seems reasonable enough that they should also be able to follow, in the sense of understand, the actions they are taking.

A final point to make with consideration to the Keep it Simple, Stupid is a rule or guide is that it should also apply to style: *Don't then 'over-egg the pudding' and or 'gild the lily'.*

“Michael always says, ‘K-I-S-S, Keep It Simple, Stupid.’ Great advice, hurts my feelings every time.”

Dwight Schrute, in THE OFFICE



“The plausibility which playgoers require connects the art to the real world; the coherence they demand makes recognisable patterns of the elements. The play's conventions related to other

plays (and films and books and operas and paintings), which themselves created patterns and shapes in order to express something real and actual in the world."

David Edgar, HOW PLAYS WORK

Plausibility, Believability and Credibility

'I just didn't buy it'. 'It all went a bit silly'. 'Too far-fetched.'
'That wouldn't happen.' *'I know we're meant to suspend our disbelief and all that, but you can only accept so much'. 'Truth may be stranger than fiction, and the story may be true and all that – but it certainly didn't ring true'. 'Pushed it way beyond the bounds of any world I know'.*

Plausibility. Is it seemingly reasonable or probable? Does the action of the narrative fit with our knowledge of the subject and our experience of life? Here we are dealing with a degree of flexibility of thought. We might say, *'It was just about plausible'*, suggesting perhaps that reasonableness had almost but not quite reached its limits.

Believability. This ultimately comes down to personal instinct. There's often a moment in a book or film when something in your brain says *'I just don't believe this anymore.'* For example, the modern reader usually has a bit of a problem with the death of Krook, the brother of Mrs Smallweed, in BLEAK HOUSE. The explanation given is 'spontaneous combustion'. Really? But to be fair to Dickens, there were scientists of his era who thought that

spontaneous combustion was indeed possible. Time, however, has not been kind that that plot twist.

Credibility. Does it convince? The emphasis here is on the fiction to persuade you to accept its reality. With credibility it's less that you stopped believing and more that the story failed in its duty to make itself tenable. Again an example from the great Charles Dickens. There have always been questions about the Monk sub-plot in OLIVER TWIST. Who knew and didn't know about the will? And if certain people don't know about the will, why criminalise Olivier in the first place?

Some more thoughts on plausibility, believability and credibility...

"Acting is all about honesty. If you can fake that, you've got it made."

George Burns

"I don't care about motivation. I care about credibility."

Eliot Spitzer, politician

"There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

William Shakespeare

"Truth is so hard to tell, it sometimes needs fiction to make it plausible."

Francis Bacon

“Reality doesn’t have to be plausible. Reality can be as preposterous as it pleases.”

Lionel Shriver (born Margaret Ann Shriver), author and journalist

“A lack of realism in the vision today costs credibility tomorrow”

John C. Maxwell, author, speaker and pastor

“All credibility, all good conscience, all evidence of truth come only from the senses.”

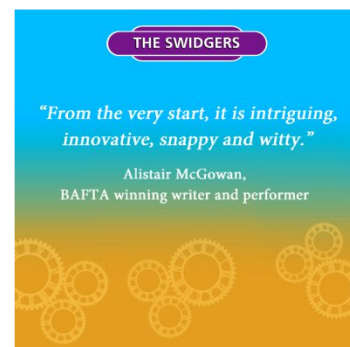
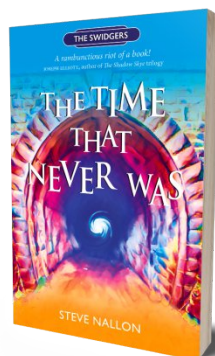
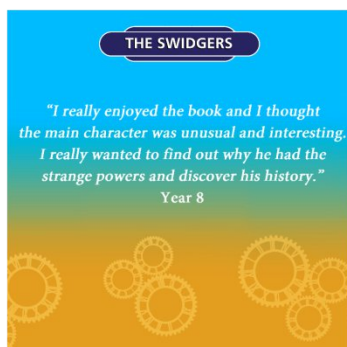
Friedrich Nietzsche

“Truth is terrific, reality is even better, but believability is best of all. Because without it, truth and reality go right out the window....”

William Goldman, ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE

“We remember that the dramatic construction can either be right or wrong, but the story can be true or false. And this decision as to the truthfulness of the material is not simple, because it is not necessary that the story which is told should actually have happened. All a story needs to be true to life is that it might have happened or, you can go as far as to say, that it is likely to have happened. Strangely enough, this demand of probability eliminates a great many stories of events which actually occurred because they are not probable, despite the fact that they are true.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)





Some Warnings, Some Encouragements

“Most playwrights are acquainted with the basic rules of dramaturgy, and most of us – from time to time – cheat. If the action of a character in one scene, for example, is to FLEE THE COUNTRY, we know that a good way to start would be having him LEAVE THE ROOM.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

Learn the Basics

There are numerous books which set out basic rules and offer straight forward advice concerning craft and technique – and many of their suggestions and recommendations are including throughout WRITING SKILLS. These books are written by people who’ve been there, done that and bought the T-shirt. It may seem somewhat obvious to say it, but we can all learn then from those who’ve taken the journey before us.

“There seems to be a great confusion about the purpose of technique, and most of us, raised in states which begin with a vowel, unconsciously agree that the purpose of technique is to free the viewer from the onerous responsibility of experiencing anything.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS



“Beware of advice – even this.”

Carl Sandburg, American poet, biographer, journalist, and editor

Be Wary of too much Craft and Technique

Remember the ancient Latin proverb *Ars est celare artem* – ‘Art consists in concealing art’. Ironically it is not known who said it first, but it’s usually attributed to P. Ovidius Naso (Ovid). It’s an adage that has many applications, but here the concern is with the over reliance on craft and technique. The point being that once you begin to notice the artistry, the artifice itself can begin to fall apart.



And this can apply to style too. Even the work and style of the great David Mamet. His ‘statement as action’ drama theory works very well but the dialogue, often a relentless ‘action statement’ matched by ‘counter-action statement’, can occasionally turn into a

bit of a game of ping-pong. The Mamet style is easily parodied, as it was in the show FORBIDDEN BROADWAY. And once you've seen the Mamet technique taken apart in parody you become aware of its artistry – in other words, its structure and its tricks. The same might be said for the work of Aaron Sorkin. His scenes often end with a clever, neat turn of phrase. The problem with this isn't the phrase itself but how often he does it, for if that way of concluding a scene is over used, as it often is with Sorkin, you start to notice it.

“I tend to write characters who are hyper-communicative. I really admire writers like David Mamet, Sam Shepard, and Harold Pinter, who are able to make absolute poetry out of characters who have difficulty communicating, who are hardly ever saying what they mean; it’s a fantastic thing to watch and a fantastic thing to listen to. It’s not something I’ve ever been able to do. My characters tend to use ten words when one would’ve sufficed. They say exactly what they mean in all different kinds of ways, and I try to make it fun.”

Aaron Sorkin



“Let’s make sure we follow the rule against circularity. Don’t do the same thing twice. This circularity, or repetition of the same incident

in different guises, is antithetical to the dramatic form. It is the signature of both the epic and the autobiography, and the reason both are adapted into drama with much difficulty and little success."

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

Avoiding Repetition

David Mamet called one of his books on writing THREE USES OF KNIFE. And in ON DIRECTING FILM he explains the phrase in more detail – “As Leadbelly said about the blues, he says in the first verse you use a knife to cut bread, in the second verse use a knife to shave, and in the third verse use it to kill your unfaithful girlfriend. It’s the same knife, but the stakes change, which is exactly the way a play or movie is structured. You don’t want to use the knife in the first scene to cut bread and in the second use it to cut cheese. We already know it can cut bread. What else can it do?”



Mamet’s point is that a dramatic idea or action or event should be developed across a story and never simply repeated. The use of the knife he is talking about in the song is developed in a

dramatically progressive manner. And the idea of progression is important because you'd never, to use the Leadbelly song principle, first the use the knife on the throat and then have it cut bread. That would be a regression.



There's a similar point in comedy. A 'Running Joke' is not a repeated joke. The writer finds a variation, and it's always progressive. If Inspector Clouseau first drives into a swimming pool on a bicycle, in the next scene Clouseau would drive into the pool in a car and then following that it would be a truck. Progressively bigger, progressively more damage. And progressively funnier.

"The same thing happened today that happened yesterday, only to different people."
Walter Winchell



"No Hugging, No Learning."

The 'Seinfeld' Credo

Avoid the Clichés Like the Plague

"Very clever, but not quite clever enough." "There's no time to explain." "It's not you, it's me." "We've got company." "I'm not angry, just disappointed." "I've got a bad feeling about this."

When does a phrase become a cliché? Well, the simple and practical answer to that is when we begin to notice it. The same applies to plot points. The gun that jams at the crucial moment, the would-be killer who is revealed in a 'mirror scare' on the turn of a bathroom cabinet, the conveniently sized air vent that allows for escape, the door ominously creaking open that turns out to be only the cat. We've seen them all before. And if we see them too many times again, we become suddenly aware of the tale's fictionality, which breaks the spell of absorption.



That said, audiences and readers have certain expectations – particularly genre expectations – and if they are not present, those watching or reading will be disappointed. For example, in an action

movie, the bad guys strokes a cat, the good guy pets a dog. Why, because we all know cats are weird and a dog is a man's best friend. And of course it's always the hero who kills the main bad guy, whereas it's his sidekick that kills the bad guy's henchman. And it's never the other way round because that is what happens in action movies and we'd be disappointed if it were not the case. Simples.

The basic problem with the cliché is that it is essentially a copy of a copy, and so it loses its impact. And worse, if you claim it for yourself, you begin to look foolish. As Gérard de Nerval said, "The first man who compared woman to a rose was a poet, the second, an imbecile." On the other hand, as Harsha Bhogle said, "Clichés are clichés because they are true." And in that sense they work. The trick is to make them somehow original. As Samuel Goldwyn famously said when looking for that big commercial hit, "What we need are some new clichés." That sounds oxymoronic but when creating a story or and plotting it out, there is a certain truth in his apparent contradiction.

Of course, sometimes there is a practical reason for the cliché. Men in movies are always seen wearing pants in bed because if they didn't, they would be naked, and that might lead to a more restrictive film classification. And yes, it's true that dying people invariable live just long enough to say something important in relation to the plot, but that's only because they were fated to die in the plot in that way in the first place. It's true as well there's always a

young kid in a story who's smarter than the adults. In fact, it's often the kid who has the solution to the whole thing, for example in Spielberg's WAR OF THE WORDS, or they may have a simple emotional insight lacking in the protagonist as, for example, in THE ADAM PROJECT.



There are clichés in narrative fiction too, for example, opening a book with a line about the weather or a character waking up. Both set alarm bells ringing in the mind of the would-be literary agent or editor at a publishing house because they've read such beginnings too many times before. Such clichés are best avoided if you want to escape the dreaded slush pile.



Some more thoughts on clichés...

***“It is a cliché that most clichés are true, but then like most clichés,
that cliché is untrue.”***

Stephen Fry, author

“Clichés can be quite fun. That’s how they got to be clichés.”

Alan Bennett, THE HISTORY BOYS

***“That’s the shock: All clichés are true. The years really do speed by.
Life really is as short as they tell you it is. And there really is a God -
so do I buy that one? If all the other clichés are true... Hell, don’t
pose me that one.”***

David Bowie, songwriter and icon

“Last, but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.”

William Safire

***“Our writers are full of clichés just as old barns are full of bats.
There is obviously no rule about this, except that anything that you
suspect of being a cliché undoubtedly is one and had better be
removed.”*** Wolcott Gibbsod



“Good storytelling never gives you four; it gives you two plus two... Don’t give the audience the answer; give the audience the pieces and compel them to conclude the answer. Audiences have an unconscious desire to work for their entertainment. They are rewarded with a sense of thrill and delight when they find the answers themselves.”

Bob Peterson co-writer of FINDING NEMO

Audience Configuration

Let audiences and readers work things out for themselves. In other words, don’t over explain. The human brain likes to figure things out. It’s hardwired to make connections, see patterns and solve puzzles. As David Mamet says in THREE USES OF KNIFE, “It is our nature to elaborate perception into hypothesis and then reduce those hypotheses to information upon which we can act. It is our special adaptive device equivalent to the bird’s flight – our unique survival tool. And drama, music, and art our celebration of that tool.”

Mamet might also have added laughter to that list, because people always talk about ‘getting the joke’. And that’s because one of the theories as to why laugh is that when we work out the joke, we reward ourselves with laughter. We all know that if you have to have the joke explained to you, then you won’t laugh. And there’s a correlation here with drama: explain too much and there’s no pleasure for the brain in doing the working out for itself.

“You always want to tell the story in cuts. Which is to say, through the juxtaposition of images that are basically uninflected. Mr Eisenstein tells us that the best image is an uninflected image. A shot of a teacup. A shot of a fork. A shot of a door. Let the cut tell the story... If you listen to the way people tell stories, you will hear that they tell them cinematically. They jump from one thing to the next, and the story is moved along by the juxtaposition of images – which is to say, by the cut.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



“We remember that the spectator anticipates, evaluates, moves forward, feels suspense, experiences emotions, hopes and fears, is joyful and depressed, satisfied and disappointed. In order to cause the spectator to undergo all these pleasant and unpleasant reactions and feelings, he must be interested.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

What Happens Next? and Do we Care?

All stories are driven by two important questions: *What happens next?* And *Do I care?* The story can be about a worthy and celebrated event, but if it is not told or presented well in plot terms then it simply won't work. As Robert McKee says in *STORY*, “Given the choice between trivial material brilliantly told versus profound material badly told, an audience will always choose the trivial told brilliantly.”

Some more thoughts on maintaining interest in what happens next and caring about characters...

“Story as such can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next.”

E.M. Forster

“The audience won’t care if the characters don’t. A good comedy is not about silly people doing silly things. Comedy has to be about something important – important to the characters, and important to the society in which it is played. It is about serious characters doing desperate things because they have left themselves no choice.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“Aristotle’s notion of Unity of Action: in effect, that the play should be about only one thing, and that that thing should be what the hero is trying to get. Unstinting application of this rule makes great plays because the only thing we, as audience, care about in the theatre is WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

“Look carefully at the climactic moments. Often, the climactic scenes don’t quite make it. In film, the phrase they use to express this is ‘punch up’. What that generally means in film is to make the stage directions more forceful. So instead of ‘She leaves the room’, you write, ‘She slams out of the door leaving a trail of destruction in her wake.’”

Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE

“If it is not apparent what the character is trying to accomplish by saying the line, telling us how the character said it, or whether she moved to the couch isn’t going to aid the case. We might understand better what the character means but we aren’t particularly going to care.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS



“Unlike in real life, practically everything that gets mentioned in a play has a relevance sooner or later.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Avoiding the Extraneous

David Mamet says in THREE USES OF KNIFE “That which the Hero requires is the play. In a perfect play we find nothing extraneous to his or her single desire. Every incident either impedes or aids the hero/heroine in the quest for the single goal.” Edgar Allen Poe said something similar in his A CHAPTER OF SUGGESTIONS written in 1845 when he tried to define the idea of a plot:

Plot is very imperfectly understood, and has never been rightly defined. Many persons regard it as mere complexity of incident. In its most rigorous acceptation, it is that from which no component atom can be removed, and in which none of the component atoms can be displaced, without

ruin to the whole; and although a sufficiently good plot may be constructed, without attention to the whole rigor of this definition, still it is the definition which the true artist should always keep in view, and always endeavour to consummate in his works.

If you accept what David Mamet and Edgar Allen Poe are saying then you could also maintain that there should in an ideal plot be no element placed within it that isn't necessary. What you would have then is what people call a 'tight plot', where in the process of 'tight plotting' all the fat, as it were, the superfluous and unnecessary events, speeches or characters, have been lopped off. A phrase used to express a similar point is 'Cut to the chase', meaning not only get the exciting part, but also the most relevant part. Spare us all that guff, waffle and flimflam.



Another phrase that is worth mentioning is 'Shoe leather' scenes. This term is film shorthand for shots of characters walking from one place to another or people driving from A to B. Sometimes

such scenes are necessary, but usually the journey can be assumed. And if there are A-to-B driving sequences the shot must at least end with the traveller parking right outside the building, which, of course, almost never happens in life. *Why?* Because it saves time.

In fact there are many aspects of real life that we don't need to see unless they are crucial to the plot. We assume people go the lavatory, that they pass the time of day with their neighbour, that when they catch a train, they buy a ticket first. Endless happenings of life, most of which are rarely included, unless absolutely necessary, in what Mamet or Poe would consider the ideal plot.

But there are exceptions. For example, the 'red herring'. It may be that the writer wants to mislead or distract the audience or reader and so a manufactured complication is created that is designed to throw you off the scent. In a way the red herring is extraneous to the action, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have a plot or design function.



Another exception perhaps is the appendage of a song.

Raindrops Keep Falling on Your Head in BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID is completely superfluous plot wise, but it's fun and offers contrast and relief from all the guns and the shooting. Even narrative musicals have songs without any purpose whatsoever, except perhaps to show off the talents of the leading lady sing. No one, for example, has ever worked out why Julie Andrews sings the Ukrainian folk song *Trinkt le Chaim* (The Jewish Wedding Song) in THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLE beyond it being a diverting interlude.



A further exception is intentional digressions. An example of this would be the parody movie AUSTIN POWERS where there is an adjunct covering the impact on a family when a minor character is killed. Yes, all those people who work in the volcano lairs of villains in 007 movies have lives beyond being target practice for James Bond, but it's simply not in the nature of the genre to explore them in any sort of detail.

It's also worth pointing on the subject of that which is extraneous that audiences, and indeed readers, don't often realise

whatever it is *is* extraneous until they leave the theatre or finish the book. And perhaps by then it doesn't matter that much.

Some more thoughts on avoiding the unnecessary (or keeping it)...

“Everything which does not put forward the meaning of the play impedes the meaning of the play. To do too much or too little is to migrate and weaken the meaning. The acting, the design, the direction should all consist only of that bare minimum necessity to put forward the action. Anything else is an embellishment.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

“When writing fiction, you learn to only put things and characters in that are going to progress your story. There is something to be learned about that approach in real life.”

Carl Henegan, DARKNESS LEFT UNDONE

“Every action, every happening or event, every development to which we can conclude, should be pushed into the lapse of time. It is without interest to us. If something to which we can conclude is shown to us, it has the same effect as if we were told again what we already know. It is as if it was told to us twice, thereby boring us and slowing the process of the picture. Only those developments and happenings to which we cannot conclude with certainty are interesting to us, and they should be shown.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

“Don't throw out a sequence with big laughs simply to stay 'on story'. Everyone who teaches screenwriting emphasises that, above all else, you must stay 'on story'. Every executive I have ever met believes this. This is not true. Comedy is the exception to this rule.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“Never include a character with no real function... No one crops up in a play without a specific function, which is either directly related to the main plot or part of the sub-plot that somehow mirrors the main plot.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Should the script writer – for some reason or other – give us another scene which may possibly represent another storyline, he is hindering our forward movement... He takes away all the strength and power of the intervening scenes because our interest lies another direction, this prevents us from concentrating upon these other events. It is very dangerous to hinder the attraction of one anticipation by interposing equally important scenes; that result in the splitting of our interest. “

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



“Good fiction, I have said, is intellectually and emotionally significant. All this means is that a story with a stupid central idea, no matter how brilliantly the story is told, will be a stupid story.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

Saying Clear of Stupid Ideas (or not, as the case maybe)

Staying clear of stupid ideas is arguably the most stupid advice anyone can offer for the simple reason that ultimately you'll never know if it works until the public get the see or read it. They may react in an unexpected way, as the plot in the movie THE PRODUCERS

proved. Andrew Lloyd Webber nearly pulled the stage musical CATS a week before it was due to open because he felt that he would end up being the laughing stock of the West End. In the event, the show went ahead and CATS became a huge success. But, er, less so the movie.



The point is that stupid ideas only reveal themselves to be stupid when put in front of a reader or audience. So how do you know if they are stupid before writing the story? Well, in truth, you don't. So perhaps the question about stupid ideas ultimately comes to your own belief, conviction and perseverance.

'Spay It.'

The tow word review of the movie CATS by Scott Tobias on NPR



I am displeased when sometimes even the worthy Homer nods.”

Horace, EPISTOLAS AD PISONES DE ARS POETICA

‘Even Homer Sometimes Sleeps.’

‘Even Homer sometimes sleeps’ is an old literary aphorism from Horace that reminds us that even great writers aren’t always at their very best. Horace may have been displeased sometimes by some of Homer’s weaker passages, but striving for absolute perfection all the time can be a foolish task. As Joe E. Brown as Osgood Fielding III says at the end of *SOME LIKE IT HOT* – “Nobody’s perfect!”

Some thoughts on sometimes not always being very good...

“Mountains will go into labour, and a silly little mouse will be born.”

Horace

***‘Dans ses écrits, un sage Italien
Dit que le mieux est l’ennemi du bien.’
(In his writings, a wise Italian
says that the best is the enemy of the good)
Voltaire, in his moral poem La Bégueule***

***“No matter our talent, we all know in the midnight of our souls
that ninety percent of what we do is less than our best.”***

Robert McKee, *STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING*



“Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself; but talent instantly recognises genius, and MacDonald had talent enough for his profession to enable him to perceive that there was no humiliation in seeking the assistance of one who already stood alone in Europe, both in his gifts and in his experience.”

**Arthur Conan Doyle, describing the character Alec MacDonald in
THE VALLEY OF FEAR**

Be Able to Recognise That Which is Better than Your Own Work

The curse of mediocrity is not being able to see beyond itself. A cruel thing to say perhaps, but what this means in practice is that those writers who are mediocre will not recognise that their own work is mediocre simply because they are unable to see what is true excellence. And if they don't know their own work isn't up to scratch that means they can't fix it. And this applies to story structure as well as the writing itself, for so much of writing is problem solving. Not realising that the story you're telling doesn't hang together means it will never hang together because you, as the writer, are unable to see that there is a problem. And even if you show it to someone else and they point out the problem, your mediocrity will probably blinker you from understanding what they're talking about.

“Mediocrity in poets has never been tolerated by either men, or gods, or booksellers.”

Horace, EPISTOLAS AD PISONES DE ARS POETICA



Some more thoughts, advice, some warnings, some encouragements...

“Experience has shown that a simple and unsophisticated people have a much more strict judgement of what is possible and true to life than educated and sophisticated people. It seems as though the latter are more accustomed to deal fictitious values, and their apparatus of thinking is better fitted to the fullest to the philosophy of ‘as if.’ Time and again, I have accompanied ‘sophisticated people’ to see an improbable movie and have seen them enjoy it in spite of its improbability. But the people around us – to our astonishment – thought it was silly on account of its improbability, and when the audience renders such a verdict, it refuses to take part in the action. The only time when it relaxes the strictness of this judgement is in comedy or fantasy.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

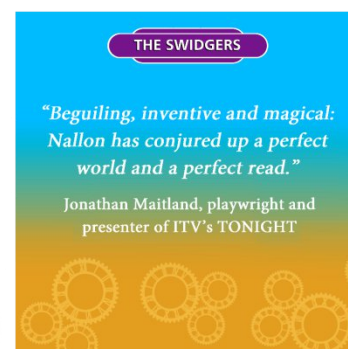
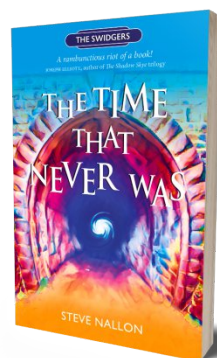
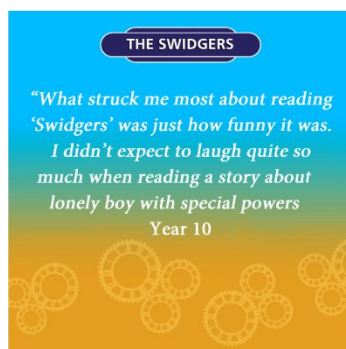
“You know, a good skier rarely worries about a route. He just goes, confident that he’ll react to changes in the trial as they come upon

him. It's the same thing in writing: You have to have confidence in your technique. That is the beauty of mastering the right tone at the right time – it enables you to feel like a good skier, nice and relaxed for the next unexpected turn."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"“Why did all those Olympic skaters fall down?’ The only answer I know is that they hadn’t practiced enough. Practice with these tools until you find them boring, then practice more.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



writing skills

Advice from Writers on Researching, Rewriting, Revising and Editing

Research

“I don’t believe in writing anything that I don’t know about or haven’t researched about personally. I like to transport the reader to places, and in order to do that I have to do the research.”

Jackie Collins

“Do research. Feed your talent. Research not only wins the war on cliché, it’s the key to victory over fear and its cousin, depression.”

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

“Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“As far as I’m concerned, if you want to find out about the last day of World War II or the roots of the Indian Mutiny, get thee to a books catalogue.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“So many readers think that a book happens so much faster, that the writer is essentially still working on the book until release day. Such is not the case. Often a book will take one and a half to two years before released, and during that time, the writer is working on something else entirely.”

Margaret Atwood



The First Draft

“The point of a first draft of a novel is not perfection. It’s to get the story down as best you can... and finish it. Just finish the book. It can be on the shorter end if you want. It can be absurdly long, that’s fine, too... But don’t fixate on being perfect, or even on being great. Just finish the first draft. And then to get to work on making your manuscript better.”

Margaret Atwood

“It is better to write a bad first draft than to write no first draft at all.”

Will Shetterly, American writer of fantasy and science fiction

“The usual experience of young writers is that during the process of writing the first draught they feel all that they write is alive, full of

interest, but then when they look at the writing the next day they find most of it dull and lifeless.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Secure writers don’t sell first drafts. They patiently rewrite until the script is as director-ready, as actor-ready as possible. Unfinished work invites tampering, while polished, mature work seals its integrity.”

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

“By now, my practice was far removed from when I’d first begun to write poetry and being unable to change a single word. Back then, the first draft was the final draft and I would have been devastated if anyone had suggested revisions. Soon enough, I learnt that most of writing is actually rewriting, and that the words you scribble on the page are the raw material from which you might be able to sculpt something of substance.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“Ernest Hemingway had a rather personal way to describe first drafts. To paraphrase, he said all of them are like, ahem, biological waste.”

James Scott Bell

“You write a script twice. The first time you pour out all your passion anger, energy, and frustration. Then you go back and write it with your head.”

Jimmy McGovern

“When I’m writing the first draft of a novel, I’m mostly writing it for me. I’m telling myself a story that has been haunting me for months, maybe years. It’s getting a story down on paper that simply no one else in the world could ever write. I genuinely try not to think about other readers when I’m writing that first draft. I try

not to imagine what my close friends will think of the new book, or young readers out there I don't know, or critics, or librarians, or whatever."

Margaret Atwood

"Not every book has to be loaded with symbolism, irony or musical language (they call it prose for a reason, y'know), but it seems to me that every book – at least everyone worth reading – is about something. Your job during or just after the first draught is to decide what something or somethings yours is about. Your job in the second draft – one of them, anyway – is to make that something even more clear."

Stephen King, ON WRITING



Cutting, Editing, Revising, Rewriting and Discarding

"Try to read your own work as a stranger would read it, or even better, as an enemy would."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"Rewriting speeches. Try and get this done in advance, too. Constant alterations to a text in rehearsal can give an impression that everything is up for grabs. Soon the stage manager will be providing curtain lines and the technicians will be chipping in with

some good additional visual gags. Technicians who spend a large amount of their time gazing at plays through glass and hearing the the diaplogue second-hand over indistinct tannoy speakers are very partial to visual gags.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

I’ve never written anything that I haven’t wanted to write again. I want to, and still am, writing A FEW GOOD MEN again. I didn’t know what I was doing then, and I’m still trying to get it right. I’d write THE SOCIAL NETWORK again if they would let me, I’d write MONEYBALL again. I would write THE WEST WING again.”

Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

“I used to say that a good writer throws out the stuff that everyone else keeps. But an even better test occurs to me: perhaps a good writer keeps the stuff that everybody else throws out.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE



“When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be done.”

Stephen King

“All writers overwrite (including Shakespeare). Cut in advance. And then have the whole script retyped. If you don’t it will come back to haunt you later, I promise.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it. Or, if proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go. I can’t allow what we learned in English composition to disrupt the sound and rhythm of the narrative.”

Elmore Leonard, Elmore Leonard, American novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter

“You are only what you write, never what you rewrite.”

Simon Gray



“A word on feedback: receiving editorial notes and improving my writing as a result has been a crucial to the development of my writing skills, even when I found it hard to hear that something isn’t working. As writers, we can be too close to the text to see clearly what we’ve written, and unless we are our only writing for ourselves, we need people to assess our work-in-progress critically, and offer constructive responses. In my case, this might involve rewriting an entire novel I’ve already spent years hammering out without feedback.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“There’s no shame in backtracking. There’s no shame in revision. There’s no shame in realising that you got it wrong, or that there’s a better thing you can do that’s better than what you have done.”

Margaret Atwood

“There are inevitably other ‘passes’ to be made through the script. Literally, passing back over it, searching for repetitions, unclear moments, overstatements or maybe excessively favouring one particular character’s point of view.”

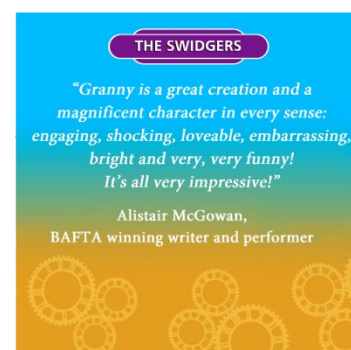
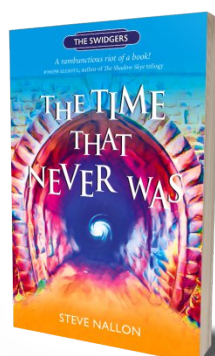
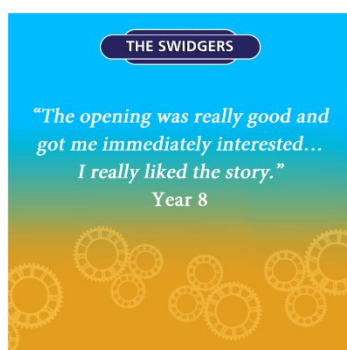
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Read it aloud if you can. Sometimes I find it pays to read the script as if you were the actor – that is to say, concentrating on a single character and keeping in that voice for the whole of that particular pass.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“I never regretted spending three years producing a discarded first version of the book, because that’s not how I saw it – then or with future work. The creative process for me is an experiment – trial and error – a trip into the unknown, which leads to new discoveries.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP



“I’ve often laboured with ferocious concentration on a scene, polishing, revising, and tearing out; rewriting, polishing, and

revising again until I finally realise that I have no idea what I'm doing, can't even recall why it was that I thought the scene necessary. Experience has taught me that, unpleasant as it is to do, I have no choice but to put the manuscript away for a while – sometimes it takes months – and then look at it again. When the proper time has elapsed – in other words when the manuscript is 'cold' – the faults stand plain... I really I think there really is no other way to write a long, serious novel. You work, shelve it for a while, work, shelve it again, work some more, month after month, year after year, and then one day you read the whole piece through and, so far as you can see, there are no mistakes. (The minute it's published and you read the printed book you see a thousand.)"

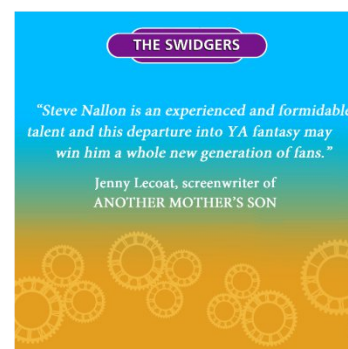
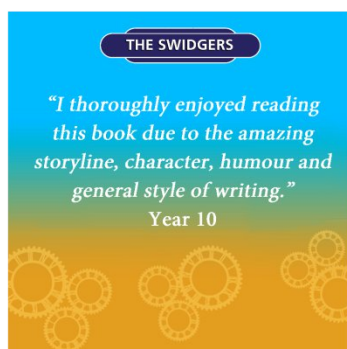
John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"Over time, I toughened up, and always welcome editorial notes. I am the writer I am today because I worked with my editor and his team, who never accepted anything but the very best from me."

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

"I will start thinking about my potential readers as I continue on with my revisions, especially when the manuscript is coming together at a later date. When there's been interest from literary agents or publishers. When there's actually a possibility that the book might be published."

Margaret Atwood



“Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works.”

Ernest Hemingway

“Read over your compositions, and when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“‘When you write a story, you’re telling yourself the story. When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story.’ Write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open.

Your stuff starts out being just for you, in other words, but then goes out. Once you know what the story is and get it right – as right as you can anyway – it belongs to anyone who wants to read it.

Criticise it.”

**John Gould, quoted and paraphrased by Stephen King in his book
ON WRITING**



“When you write a book, you spend day after today scanning and identifying trees. When you’re done, you have to step back and look at the forest.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Most of all, I’m looking for what I meant, because in the second draught I want to add scenes and incidents that reinforce that meaning. I’ll also want to delete stuff that goes in the other directions.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Murder your darlings.”
Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

“The DELETE key is on your machine for a good reason.”
Stephen King, ON WRITING

The Importance of Time

“A few days away from the script occasionally helps, as well. The play tends to get more clearly in focus. If, like me, you are going to be directing it, you need to develop a certain objectivity fairly soon.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Enough time passes between the finishing of a book and the release of it that the author in most cases is a different person once that book is in the world. That author has often moved on from that story, that author is in another world or doing something completely different. And you know what? That’s okay. Because the author’s not the star of the show. The star is the work itself.”

Margaret Atwood

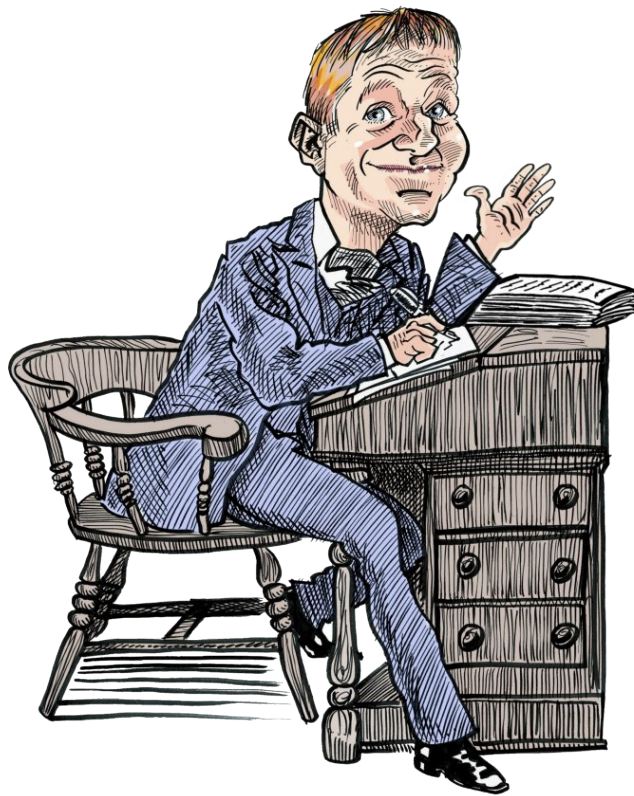
“Since at my age you begin to forget all too much, I would hardly remember what I had written the day before. It read, therefore, as if someone else has done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix the prose. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you to be your own editor.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“All writers are double, for the simple reason that you can never actually meet the author of the book you have just read. Too much time has elapsed between composition and publication, and the person who wrote the book is now a different person.”

Margaret Atwood

By Steve Nallon



THE SWIDGERS