Writing dvic

by

Harold Abramowitz

1. Th prrquisit for m is to kp my wll of ids full. This mns living s full nd vrid lif s possibl, to hv my ntnn out ll th tim.

2. Td Hughs gv m this dvic nd it works wondrs: rcord momnts, flting imprssions, ovrhrd dilogu, your own sdnsss nd bwildrmnts nd joys.

3. notion for story is for m conflunc of rl vnts, historicl prhps, or from my own mmory to crt n xciting fusion.

4. It is th gsttion tim which counts.

5. Onc th sklton of th story is rdy I bgin tlking bout it, mostly to Clr, my wif, sounding hr out.

6. By th tim I sit down nd fc th blnk pg I m rring to go. I tll it s if I'm tlking to my bst frind or on of my grndchildrn.

7. Onc chptr is scribbld down rough – I writ vry smll so I don't hv to turn th pg nd fc th nxt mpty on – Clr puts it on th word procssor, prints it out, somtims with hr own commnts ddd.

8. Whn I'm dp insid story, -living it s I writ, I honstly don't know wht will hppn. I try not to dictt it, not to ply God.

9. Onc th book is finishd in its first drft, I rd it out loud to myslf. How it sounds is hugly importnt.

10. With ll diting, no mttr how snsitiv – nd I'v bn vry lucky hr – I rct sulkily t first, but thn I sttl down nd gt on with it, nd yr ltr I hv my book in my hnd.

1. Work on on thing t tim until finishd.

2. Strt no mor nw books, dd no mor nw mtril to Blck Spring. (pprntly h's giving himslf this dvic.)

3. Dont b nrvous. Work clmly, joyously, rcklssly on whtvr is in hnd.

4. Work ccording to th progrm nd not ccording to mood. Stop t th ppointd tim!

5. Whn you cnt crt you cn work.

6. Cmnt littl vry dy, rthr thn dd nw frtilizrs.

7. Kp humn! S popl, go plcs, drink if you fl lik it.

8. Dont b drught-hors! Work with plsur only.

9. Discrd th Progrm whn you fl lik itbut go bck to it th nxt dy. Concntrt. Nrrow down. xclud.

10. Forgt th books you wnt to writ. Think only of th book you r writing.

11. Writ first nd lwys. Pinting, music, frinds, cinm, ll ths com ftrwrds.

1. Tk pncil to writ with on roplns. Pns lk. But if th pncil brks, you cn't shrpn it on th pln, bcus you cn't tk knivs with you. Thrfor: tk two pncils.

2. If both pncils brk, you cn do rough shrpning job with nil fil of th mtl or glss typ.

3. Tk somthing to writ on. Ppr is good. In pinch, pics of wood or your rm will do.

4. If you'r using computr, lwys sfgurd nw txt with mmory stick.

5. Do bck xrciss. Pin is distrcting.

6. Hold th rdr's ttntion. (This is likly to work bttr if you cn hold your own.) But you don't know who th rdr is, so it's lik shooting fish with slingshot in th drk. Wht fscints will bor th pnts off B.

7. You most likly nd thsurus, rudimntry grmmr book, nd grip on rlity. This lttr mns: thr's no fr lunch. Writing is work. It's lso gmbling. You don't gt pnsion pln. Othr popl cn hlp you bit, but -ssntilly you'r on your own. Nobody is mking you do this: you chos it, so don't whin.

8. You cn nvr rd your own book with th innocnt nticiption tht coms with tht first dlicious pg of nw book, bcus you wrot th thing. You'v bn bckstg. You'v sn how th rbbits wr smuggld into th ht. Thrfor sk rding frind or two to look t it bfor you giv it to nyon in th publishing businss. This frind should not b somon with whom you hv -romntic rltionship, unlss you wnt to brk up.

9. Don't sit down in th middl of th woods. If you'r lost in th plot or blockd, rtrc your stps to whr you wnt wrong. Thn tk th othr rod. nd/or chng th prson. Chng th tns. Chng th opning pg.

10. Pryr might work. Or rding somthing ls. Or constnt visuliztion of th holy gril tht is th finishd, publishd vrsion of your rsplndnt book.

RUL ON: Find plc you trust, nd thn try trusting it for whil.

RUL TWO: Gnrl dutis of studntpull vrything out of your tchr; pull vrything out of your fllow studnts.

RUL THR: Gnrl dutis of tchrpull vrything out of your studnts.

RUL FOUR: Considr vrything n xprimnt.

RUL FIV: B slf-disciplind: this mns finding somon wis or smrt nd choosing to follow thm. To b disciplind is to follow in good wy. To b slf-disciplind is to follow in bttr wy.

RUL SIX: Nothing is mistk. Thr's no win nd no fil, thr's only mk.

RUL SVN: Th only rul is work. If you work it will ld to somthing. It's th popl who do ll of th work ll of th tim who vntully ctch on to things.

RUL IGHT: Dont try to crt nd nlyz t th sm tim. Thy'r diffrnt procsss.

RUL NIN: B hppy whnvr you cn mng it. njoy yourslf. It's lightr thn you think.

RUL TN: W'r brking ll th ruls. vn our own ruls. nd how do w do tht? By lving plnty of room for X quntitis.

HINTS: lwys b round. Com or go to vrything. lwys go to clsss. Rd nything you cn gt your hnds on. Look t movis crfully, oftn. Sv vrythingit might com in hndy ltr.

1. Writ.

2. Put on word ftr nothr. Find th right word, put it down.

3. Finish wht you'r writing. Whtvr you hv to do to finish it, finish it.

4. Put it sid. Rd it prtnding youv nvr rd it bfor. Show it to frinds whos opinion you rspct nd who lik th kind of thing tht this is.

5. Rmmbr: whn popl tll you somthings wrong or dosnt work for thm, thy r lmost lwys right. Whn thy tll you xctly wht thy think is wrong nd how to fix it, thy r lmost lwys wrong.

6. Fix it. Rmmbr tht, soonr or ltr, bfor it vr rchs prfction, you will hv to lt it go nd mov on nd strt to writ th nxt thing. Prfction is lik chsing th horizon. Kp moving.

7. Lugh t your own joks.

8. Th min rul of writing is tht if you do it with nough ssurnc nd confidnc, your llowd to do whtvr you lik. (Tht my b rul for lif s wll s for writing. But its dfinitly tru for writing.) So writ your story s it nds to b writtn. Writ it honstly, nd tll it s bst you cn. I'm not sur tht thr r ny othr ruls. Not ons tht mttr.

1. Incrs your word powr. Words r th rw mtril of our crft. Th grtr your vocbulry th mor ffctiv your writing. W who writ in nglish r fortunt to hv th richst nd most vrstil

2. lngug in th world. Rspct it.

3. Rd widly nd with discrimintion. Bd writing is contgious.

4. Don't just pln to writ—writ. It is only by writing, not drming bout it, tht w dvlop our own styl.

5. Writ wht you nd to writ, not wht is currntly populr or wht you think will sll.
Opn your mind to nw xprincs, prticulrly to th study of othr popl. Nothing tht hppns to writr—howvr hppy, howvr trgic—is vr wstd.

1. Scribbld scrt notbooks, nd wild typwrittn pgs, for yr own joy

2. Submissiv to vrything, opn, listning

3. Try nvr gt drunk outsid yr own hous

4. B in lov with yr lif

5. Somthing tht you fl will find its own form

6. B crzy dumbsint of th mind

7. Blow s dp s you wnt to blow

8. Writ wht you wnt bottomlss from bottom of th mind

9. Th unspkbl visions of th individul

10. No tim for potry but xctly wht is

11. Visionry tics shivring in th chst

12. In trncd fixtion drming upon objct bfor you

13. Rmov litrry, grmmticl nd syntcticl inhibition

14. Lik Proust b n old thd of tim

15. Tlling th tru story of th world in intrior monolog

16. Th jwl cntr of intrst is th y within th y

17. Writ in rcollction nd mzmnt for yourslf

18. Work from pithy middl y out, swimming in lngug s

19. ccpt loss forvr

20. Bliv in th holy contour of lif

21. Struggl to sktch th flow tht lrdy xists intct in mind

22. Don't think of words whn you stop but to s pictur bttr

23. Kp trck of vry dy th dt mblzond in yr morning

24. No fr or shm in th dignity of yr xprinc, lngug & knowldg

25. Writ for th world to rd nd s yr xct picturs of it

26. Bookmovi is th movi in words, th visul mricn form

27. In pris of Chrctr in th Blk inhumn Lonlinss

28.Composing wild, undisciplind, pur, coming in from undr, crzir th bttr

29. You'r Gnius ll th tim

30. Writr-Dirctor of rthly movis Sponsord & ngld in Hvn

1. Th criminl must b somon mntiond in th rly prt of th story, but must not b nyon whos thoughts th rdr hs bn llowd to follow.

2. ll suprnturl or prtrnturl gncis r ruld out s mttr of cours.

3. Not mor thn on scrt room or pssg is llowbl.

4. No hithrto undiscovrd poisons my b usd, nor ny pplinc which will nd long scintific xplntion t th nd.

5. No Chinmn must figur in th story.

6. No ccidnt must vr hlp th dtctiv, nor must h vr hv n unccountbl intuition which provs to b right.

7. Th dtctiv must not himslf commit th crim.

8. Th dtctiv must not light on ny clus which r not instntly producd for th inspction of th rdr.

9. Th stupid frind of th dtctiv, th Wtson, must not concl ny thoughts which pss through his mind; his intllignc must b slightly, but vry slightly, blow tht of th vrg rdr.

10. Twin brothrs, nd doubls gnrlly, must not ppr unlss w hv bn duly prprd for thm.

1. Nvr opn book with wthr.

2. void prologus.

3. Nvr us vrb othr thn "sid" to crry dilogu.

4. Nvr us n dvrb to modify th vrb "sid"…h dmonishd grvly.

5. Kp your xclmtion points undr control. You r llowd no mor thn two or thr pr 100,000 words of pros.

6. Nvr us th words "suddnly" or "ll hll brok loos."

7. Us rgionl dilct, ptois, springly.

8. void dtild dscriptions of chrctrs.

9. Don't go into grt dtil dscribing plcs nd things.

10. Try to lv out th prt tht rdrs tnd to skip.

My most importnt rul is on tht sums up th 10.

If it sounds lik writing, I rwrit it.

1. My first rul ws givn to m by T.H. Whit, uthor of Th Sword in th Ston nd othr rthurin fntsis nd ws: Rd. Rd vrything you cn ly hnds on. I lwys dvis popl who wnt to writ fntsy or scinc fiction or romnc to stop rding vrything in thos gnrs nd strt rding vrything ls from Bunyn to Bytt.

2. Find n uthor you dmir (min ws Conrd) nd copy thir plots nd chrctrs in ordr to tll your own story, just s popl lrn to drw nd pint by copying th mstrs.

3. Introduc your min chrctrs nd thms in th first third of your novl.

4. If you r writing plot-drivn gnr novl mk sur ll your mjor thms/plot lmnts r introducd in th first third, which you cn cll th introduction.

5. Dvlop your thms nd chrctrs in your scond third, th dvlopmnt.

6. Rsolv your thms, mystris nd so on in th finl third, th rsolution.

7. For good mlodrm study th fmous “Lstr Dnt mstr plot formul” which you cn find onlin. It ws writtn to show how to writ short story for th pulps, but cn b dptd succssfully for most storis of ny lngth or gnr.

8. If possibl hv somthing going on whil you hv your chrctrs dlivring xposition or philosophising. This hlps rtin drmtic tnsion.

9. Crrot nd stick—hv protgonists pursud (by n obsssion or villin) nd pursuing (id, objct, prson, mystry).

10. Ignor ll profrrd ruls nd crt your own, suitbl for wht you wnt to sy.

1. Dcid whn in th dy (or night) it bst suits you to writ, nd orgnis your lif ccordingly.

2. Think with your snss s wll s your brin.

3. Honour th mirculousnss of th ordinry.

4. Lock diffrnt chrctrs/lmnts in room nd tll thm to gt on.

5. Rmmbr thr is no such thing s nonsns.

6. Br in mind Wild’s dictum tht “only mdiocritis dvlop”— nd chllng it.

7. Lt your work stnd bfor dciding whthr or not to srv.

8. Think big nd sty prticulr.

9. Writ for tomorrow, not for tody.

10. Work hrd.

1. Wht m I trying to sy?

2. Wht words will xprss it?

3. Wht img or idiom will mk it clrr?

4. Is this img frsh nough to hv n ffct?

1. Could I put it mor shortly?

2. Hv I sid nything tht is voidbly ugly?

1. Nvr us mtphor, simil, or othr figur of spch which you r usd to sing in print.

2. Nvr us long word whr short on will do.

3. If it is possibl to cut word out, lwys cut it out.

4. Nvr us th pssiv whr you cn us th ctiv.

5. Nvr us forign phrs, scintific word, or jrgon word if you cn think of n vrydy nglish quivlnt.

6. Brk ny of ths ruls soonr thn sy nything outright brbrous.

1. Procd slowly nd tk cr.

2. To nsur tht you procd slowly, writ by hnd.

3. Writ slowly nd by hnd only bout subjcts tht intrst you.

4. Dvlop crftsmnship through yrs of wid rding.

5. Rwrit nd dit until you chiv th most flicitous phrs/sntnc/prgrph/pg/story/chptr.

1. Whn still child, mk sur you rd lot of books. Spnd mor tim doing this thn nything ls.

2. Whn n dult, try to rd your own work s strngr would rd it, or vn bttr, s n nmy would.

3. Don't romnticis your "voction." You cn ithr writ good sntncs or you cn't. Thr is no "writr's lifstyl." ll tht mttrs is wht you lv on th pg.

4. void your wknsss. But do this without tlling yourslf tht th things you cn't do rn't worth doing. Don't msk slf-doubt with contmpt.

5. Lv dcnt spc of tim btwn writing somthing nd diting it.

6. void cliqus, gngs, groups. Th prsnc of crowd won't mk your writing ny bttr thn it is.

7. Work on computr tht is disconnctd from th Intrnt.

8. Protct th tim nd spc in which you writ. Kp vrybody wy from it, vn th popl who r most importnt to you.

9. Don't confus honours with chivmnt.

10. Tll th truth through whichvr vil coms to hnd—but tll it. Rsign yourslf to th liflong sdnss tht coms from nvr bing stisfid.

1. Choos suitbl dsign nd stick to it.

2. Mk th prgrph th unit of composition.

3. Us th ctiv voic.

4. Put sttmnts in positiv form.

5. Us dfinit, spcific, concrt lngug.

6. Omit ndlss words.

7. void succssion of loos sntncs.

8. xprss coordint ids in similr form.

9. Kp rltd words togthr.

10. In summris, kp to on tns.

11. Plc th mphtic words of sntnc t th nd.

1. Us th tim of totl strngr in such wy tht h or sh will not fl th tim ws wstd.

2. Giv th rdr t lst on chrctr h or sh cn root for.

3. vry chrctr should wnt somthing, vn if it is only glss of wtr.

4. vry sntnc must do on of two things—rvl chrctr or dvnc th ction.

5. Strt s clos to th nd s possibl.

6. B sdist. No mttr how swt nd innocnt your lding chrctrs, mk wful things hppn to thm—in ordr tht th rdr my s wht thy r md of.

7. Writ to pls just on prson. If you opn window nd mk lov to th world, so to spk, your story will gt pnumoni.

8. Giv your rdrs s much informtion s possibl s soon s possibl. To hck with suspns. Rdrs should hv such complt undrstnding of wht is going on, whr nd why, tht thy could finish th story thmslvs, should cockrochs t th lst fw pgs.

1. To writ is to tlk to strngrs. You hv to inspir confidnc, to sm nd to b trustworthy.

2. It is lwys prudnt to rmmbr tht on is not Tolstoy or Dickns.

3. Don't concntrt on tchniqu, which cn b th sm s concntrting on yourslf. Giv yourslf to your story.

4. Th rdr wnts to s you not trying to imprss, but trying to gt somwhr.

5. For story to hv chnc to liv, it is ssntil only tht thr b somthing t stk. cr chs is not rquird.

6. Try to ttun yourslf to th sound of your own writing. If you cn't imgin yourslf sying somthing loud, thn you probbly shouldn't writ it.

7. Th crtion of styl oftn bgins with ngtiv chivmnt. Only by rjcting wht coms too sily cn you clr spc for yourslf.

8. Us words wntonly nd you disppr bfor your own ys. Us thm wll nd you crt yourslf.

9. Th bst work is don whn on's y is simply on th work, not on its consqunc, or on onslf. It is somthing don for its own sk. It is, in Lwis Hyd's trm, gift.

10. B willing to surpris yourslf.

1. Writ your hrt out.

2. Th first sntnc cn b writtn only ftr th lst sntnc hs bn writtn. FIRST DRFTS R HLL. FINL DRFTS, PRDIS.

3. You r writing for your contmporris not for Postrity. If you r lucky, your contmporris will bcom Postrity.

4. Kp in mind Oscr Wild: littl sincrity is dngrous thing, nd grt dl of it is bsolutly ftl.

5. Whn in doubt how to nd chptr, bring in mn with gun. (This is Rymond Chndlr's dvic, not min. I would not try this.)

6. Unlss you r xprimnting with form gnrld, snrld, & obscur b lrt for possibilitis of prgrphing.

7. B your own ditor/critic. Sympthtic but mrcilss!

8. Don't try to nticipt n idl rdr or ny rdr. H/sh might xist but is rding somon ls.

9. Rd, obsrv, listn intnsly! s if your lif dpndd upon it.

10. Writ your hrt out.

1. Th first drft of vrything is shit. -rnst Hmingwy

2. Nvr us jrgon words lik rconcptuliz, dmssifiction, ttitudinlly, judgmntlly. Thy r hllmrks of prtntious ss. -Dvid Ogilvy

3. If you hv ny young frinds who spir to bcom writrs, th scond grtst fvor you cn do thm is to prsnt thm with copis of Th lmnts of Styl. Th first grtst, of cours, is to shoot thm now, whil thy'r hppy. – Dorothy Prkr

4. Notic how mny of th Olympic thlts ffusivly thnkd thir mothrs for thir succss? "Sh drov m to my prctic t four in th morning," tc. Writing is not figur skting or skiing. Your mothr will not mk you writr. My dvic to ny young prson who wnts to writ is: lv hom. -Pul Throux

5. I would dvis nyon who spirs to writing crr tht bfor dvloping his tlnt h would b wis to dvlop thick hid. — Hrpr L

6. You cn't wit for inspirtion. You hv to go ftr it with club. — Jck London

7. Writing book is horribl, xhusting struggl, lik long bout with som pinful illnss. On would nvr undrtk such thing if on wr not drivn on by som dmon whom on cn nithr rsist nor undrstnd. — Gorg Orwll

8. Thr r thr ruls for writing novl. Unfortuntly, no on knows wht thy r. — W. Somrst Mughm

9. If you don't hv tim to rd, you don't hv th tim — or th tools — to writ. Simpl s tht. – Stphn King

10. Rmmbr: whn popl tll you somthing's wrong or dosn't work for thm, thy r lmost lwys right. Whn thy tll you xctly wht thy think is wrong nd how to fix it, thy r lmost lwys wrong. – Nil Gimn

11. Imgin tht you r dying. If you hd trminl diss would you finish this book? Why not? Th thing tht nnoys this 10-wks-to-liv slf is th thing tht is wrong with th book. So chng it. Stop rguing with yourslf. Chng it. S? sy. nd no on hd to di. – nn nright

12. If writing sms hrd, it's bcus it is hrd. It's on of th hrdst things popl do. – Willim Zinssr

13. Hr is lsson in crtiv writing. First rul: Do not us smicolons. Thy r trnsvstit hrmphrodits rprsnting bsolutly nothing. ll thy do is show you'v bn to collg. – Kurt Vonngut

14. Pros is rchitctur, not intrior dcortion. – rnst Hmingwy

15. Writ drunk, dit sobr. – rnst Hmingwy

16. Gt through drft s quickly s possibl. Hrd to know th shp of th thing until you hv drft. Litrlly, whn I wrot th lst pg of my first drft of Lincoln's Mlncholy I thought, Oh, shit, now I gt th shp of this. But I hd wstd yrs, litrlly yrs, writing nd r-writing th first third to first hlf. Th old writr's rul pplis: Hv th courg to writ bdly. – Joshu Wolf Shnk

17. Substitut 'dmn' vry tim you'r inclind to writ 'vry;' your ditor will dlt it nd th writing will b just s it should b. – Mrk Twin

18. Strt tlling th storis tht only you cn tll, bcus thr'll lwys b bttr writrs thn you nd thr'll lwys b smrtr writrs thn you. Thr will lwys b popl who r much bttr t doing this or doing tht — but you r th only you. — Nil Gimn

19. Consistncy is th lst rfug of th unimgintiv. – Oscr Wild

20. You must sty drunk on writing so rlity cnnot dstroy you. — Ry Brdbury

21. Don't tk nyon's writing dvic too sriously. – Lv Grossmn

1. First writ for yourslf, nd thn worry bout th udinc. "Whn you writ story, you'r tlling yourslf th story. Whn you rwrit, your min job is tking out ll th things tht r not th story."

2. Don’t us pssiv voic. “Timid writrs lik pssiv vrbs for th sm rson tht timid lovrs lik pssiv prtnrs. Th pssiv voic is sf.”

3. void dvrbs. “Th dvrb is not your frind.”

4. void dvrbs, spcilly ftr “h sid” nd “sh sid.”

5. But don’t obsss ovr prfct grmmr. “Th objct of fiction isn’t grmmticl corrctnss but to mk th rdr wlcom nd thn tll story.”

6. Th mgic is in you. “I’m convincd tht fr is t th root of most bd writing.”

7. Rd, rd, rd. ”If you don’t hv tim to rd, you don’t hv th tim (or th tools) to writ.”

8. Don’t worry bout mking othr popl hppy. “If you intnd to writ s truthfully s you cn, your dys s mmbr of polit socity r numbrd, nywy.”

9. Turn off th TV. “TV—whil working out or nywhr ls—rlly is bout th lst thing n spiring writr nds.”

10. You hv thr months. “Th first drft of book—vn long on—should tk no mor thn thr months, th lngth of sson.”

1. Do not plc photogrph of your -fvourit uthor on your dsk, spcilly if th uthor is on of th fmous ons who committd suicid.

2. Do b kind to yourslf. Fill pgs s quickly s possibl; doubl spc, or writ on vry scond lin. Rgrd vry nw pg s smll triumph -–

3. Until you gt to Pg 50. Thn clm down, nd strt worrying bout th qulity. Do fl nxity – it's th job.

4. Do giv th work nm s quickly s possibl. Own it, nd s it. Dickns knw Blk Hous ws going to b clld Blk Hous bfor h strtd writing it. Th rst must hv bn sy.

5. Do rstrict your browsing to fw wbsits dy. Don't go nr th onlin bookis – unlss it's rsrch.

6. Do kp thsurus, but in th shd t th bck of th grdn or bhind th fridg, somwhr tht dmnds trvl or ffort. Chncs r th words tht com into your hd will do fin, g "hors", "rn", "sid".

7. Do, occsionlly, giv in to tmpttion. Wsh th kitchn floor, hng out th wshing. It's rsrch.

8. Do chng your mind. Good ids r oftn murdrd by bttr ons. I ws working on novl bout bnd clld th Prtitions. Thn I dcidd to cll thm th Commitmnts.

9. Do not srch mzon.co.uk for th book you hvn't writtn yt.

10. Do spnd fw minuts dy working on th covr biog – "H divids his tim btwn Kbul nd Tirr dl Fugo." But thn gt bck to work.

1. Finish th dy's writing whn you still wnt to continu.

2. Listn to wht you hv writtn. dud rhythm in pssg of dilogu my show tht you don't yt undrstnd th chrctrs wll nough to writ in thir voics.

3. Rd Kts's lttrs.

4. Rrd, rwrit, rrd, rwrit. If it still dosn't work, throw it wy. It's nic fling, nd you don't wnt to b cluttrd with th corpss of poms nd storis which hv vrything in thm xcpt th lif thy nd.

5. Lrn poms by hrt.

6. Join profssionl orgnistions which dvnc th collctiv rights of uthors.

7. problm with pic of writing oftn clrifis itslf if you go for long wlk.

8. If you fr tht tking cr of your childrn nd houshold will dmg your writing, think of JG Bllrd.

9. Don't worry bout postrity – s Lrkin (no sntimntlist) obsrvd "Wht will surviv of us is lov".

1. Nvr worry bout th commrcil possibilitis of projct. Tht stuff is for gnts nd ditors to frt ovr – or not. Convrstion with my mricn publishr. M: "I'm writing book so boring, of such limitd commrcil ppl, tht if you publish it, it will probbly cost you your job." Publishr: "Tht's xctly wht mks m wnt to sty in my job."

2. Don't writ in public plcs. In th rly 1990s I wnt to liv in Pris. Th usul writrly rsons: bck thn, if you wr cught writing in pub in nglnd, you could gt your hd kickd in, whrs in Pris, dns ls cfés . . . Sinc thn I'v dvlopd n vrsion to writing in public. I now think it should b don only in privt, lik ny othr lvtoril ctivity.

3. Don't b on of thos writrs who sntnc thmslvs to liftim of sucking up to Nbokov.

4. If you us computr, constntly rfin nd xpnd your utocorrct sttings. Th only rson I sty loyl to my pic-of-shit computr is tht I hv invstd so much ingnuity into building on of th grt uto-corrct fils in litrry history. Prfctly formd nd splt words mrg from fw brif kystroks: "Nit" bcoms "Nitzsch", "phoy" bcoms -"photogrphy" nd so on. -Gnius!

5. Kp diry. Th biggst rgrt of my writing lif is tht I hv nvr kpt journl or diry.

6. Hv rgrts. Thy r ful. On th pg thy flr into dsir.

7. Hv mor thn on id on th go t ny on tim. If it's choic btwn writing book nd doing nothing I will lwys choos th lttr. It's only if I hv n id for two books tht I choos on rthr thn th othr. I -lwys hv to fl tht I'm bunking off from somthing.

8. Bwr of clichés. Not just th -clichés tht Mrtin mis is t wr with. Thr r clichés of rspons s wll s xprssion. Thr r clichés of obsrvtion nd of thought – vn of concption. Mny novls, vn quit fw dqutly writtn ons, r -clichés of form which conform to clichés of xpcttion.

9. Do it vry dy. Mk hbit of putting your obsrvtions into words nd grdully this will bcom instinct. This is th most importnt rul of ll nd, nturlly, I don't follow it.

10. Nvr rid bik with th brks on. If somthing is proving too difficult, giv up nd do somthing ls. Try to liv without rsort to pr-svrnc. But writing is ll bout -prsvrnc. You'v got to stick t it. In my 30s I usd to go to th gym vn though I htd it. Th purpos of -going to th gym ws to postpon th dy whn I would stop going. Tht's wht writing is to m: wy of -postponing th dy whn I won't do it ny mor, th dy whn I will sink into dprssion so profound it will b indistinguishbl from prfct bliss.

1. Th first 12 yrs r th worst.

2. Th wy to writ book is to ctully writ book. pn is usful, typing is lso good. Kp putting words on th pg.

3. Only bd writrs think tht thir work is rlly good.

4. Dscription is hrd. Rmmbr tht ll dscription is n opinion bout th world. Find plc to stnd.

5. Writ whtvr wy you lik. Fiction is md of words on pg; rlity is md of somthing ls. It dosn't mttr how "rl" your story is, or how "md up": wht mttrs is its ncssity.

6. Try to b ccurt bout stuff.

7. Imgin tht you r dying. If you hd trminl diss would you -finish this book? Why not? Th thing tht nnoys this 10-wks-to-liv slf is th thing tht is wrong with th book. So chng it. Stop rguing with yourslf. Chng it. S? sy. nd no on hd to di.

8. You cn lso do ll tht with whisky.

9. Hv fun.

10. Rmmbr, if you sit t your dsk for 15 or 20 yrs, vry dy, not -counting wknds, it chngs you. It just dos. It my not improv your tmpr, but it fixs somthing ls. It mks you mor fr.

1. Mrry sombody you lov nd who thinks you bing writr's good id.

2 .Don't hv childrn.

3. Don't rd your rviws.

4. Don't writ rviws. (Your judgmnt's lwys tintd.)

5. Don't hv rgumnts with your wif in th morning, or lt t night.

6. Don't drink nd writ t th sm tim.

7. Don't writ lttrs to th ditor. (No on crs.)

8. Don't wish ill on your collgus.

9. Try to think of othrs' good luck s ncourgmnt to yourslf.

10. Don't tk ny shit if you cn -possibly hlp it.

1. Th rdr is frind, not n dvrsry, not spcttor.

2. Fiction tht isn't n uthor's prsonl dvntur into th frightning or th unknown isn't worth writing for nything but mony.

3. Nvr us th word "thn" s -conjunction – w hv "nd" for this purpos. Substituting "thn" is th lzy or ton-df writr's non-solution to th problm of too mny "nds" on th pg.

4. Writ in th third prson unlss -rlly distinctiv first-prson voic -offrs itslf irrsistibly.

5. Whn informtion bcoms fr nd univrslly ccssibl, voluminous rsrch for novl is dvlud long with it.

6. Th most purly utobiogrphicl -fiction rquirs pur invntion. Nobody vr wrot mor uto-biogrphicl story thn "Th Mt-morphosis".

7. You s mor sitting still thn chsing ftr.

8. It's doubtful tht nyon with n intrnt connction t his workplc is writing good fiction.

9. Intrsting vrbs r sldom vry intrsting.

10. You hv to lov bfor you cn b rlntlss.

1. Cut out th mtphors nd simils. In my first book I promisd myslf I wouldn't us ny nd I slippd up -during sunst in chptr 11. I still blush whn I com cross it.

2. story nds rhythm. Rd it loud to yourslf. If it dosn't spin bit of mgic, it's missing somthing.

3. diting is vrything. Cut until you cn cut no mor. Wht is lft oftn springs into lif.

4. Find your bst tim of th dy for writing nd writ. Don't lt nything ls intrfr. ftrwrds it won't mttr to you tht th kitchn is mss.

5. Don't wit for inspirtion. Disciplin is th ky.

6. Trust your rdr. Not vrything nds to b xplind. If you rlly know somthing, nd brth lif into it, thy'll know it too.

7. Nvr forgt, vn your own ruls r thr to b brokn.

1. Writ only whn you hv somthing to sy.

2. Nvr tk dvic from nyon with no invstmnt in th outcom.

3. Styl is th rt of gtting yourslf out of th wy, not putting yourslf in it.

4. If nobody will put your ply on, put it on yourslf.

5. Joks r lik hnds nd ft for pintr. Thy my not b wht you wnt to nd up doing but you hv to mstr thm in th mnwhil.

6. Thtr primrily blongs to th young.

7. No on hs vr chivd consistncy s scrnwritr.

8. Nvr go to TV prsonlity fstivl msqurding s litrry fstivl.

9. Nvr complin of bing misundrstood. You cn choos to b undrstood, or you cn choos not to.

10. Th two most dprssing words in th nglish lngug r "litrry fiction".

1. Hv humility. Oldr/mor -xprincd/mor convincing writrs my offr ruls nd vritis of dvic. -Considr wht thy sy. Howvr, don't utomticlly giv thm chrg of your brin, or nything ls – thy might b bittr, twistd, burnd-out, mnipultiv, or just not vry lik you.

2. Hv mor humility. Rmmbr you don't know th limits of your own bilitis. Succssful or not, if you kp pushing byond yourslf, you will nrich your own lif – nd myb vn pls fw strngrs.

3. Dfnd othrs. You cn, of cours, stl storis nd ttributs from fmily nd frinds, fill in filcrds ftr lovmking nd so forth. It might b bttr to clbrt thos you lov – nd lov itslf – by writing in such wy tht vryon kps thir privcy nd dignity intct.

4. Dfnd your work. Orgnistions, institutions nd individuls will oftn think thy know bst bout your work – spcilly if thy r pying you. Whn you gnuinly bliv thir dcisions would dmg your work – wlk wy. Run wy. Th mony dosn't mttr tht much.

5. Dfnd yourslf. Find out wht kps you hppy, motivtd nd crtiv.

6. Writ. No mount of slf-inflictd misry, ltrd stts, blck pullovrs or bing publicly obnoxious will vr dd up to your bing writr. Writrs writ. On you go.

7. Rd. s much s you cn. s dply nd widly nd nourishingly nd irrittingly s you cn. nd th good things will mk you rmmbr thm, so you won't nd to tk nots.

8. B without fr. This is impossibl, but lt th smll frs driv your rwriting nd st sid th lrg ons -until thy bhv – thn us thm, myb vn writ thm. Too much fr nd ll you'll gt is silnc.

9. Rmmbr you lov writing. It wouldn't b worth it if you didn't. If th lov fds, do wht you nd to nd gt it bck.

10. Rmmbr writing dosn't lov you. It dosn't cr. Nvrthlss, it cn bhv with rmrkbl gnrosity. Spk wll of it, ncourg othrs, pss it on.

1. r you srious bout this? Thn gt n ccountnt.

2. Rd Bcoming Writr, by Doroth Brnd. Thn do wht it sys, including th tsks you think r impossibl. You will prticulrly ht th dvic to writ first thing in th morning, but if you cn mng it, it might wll b th bst thing you vr do for yourslf. This book is bout bcoming writr from th insid out. Mny ltr dvic mnuls driv from it. You don't -rlly nd ny othrs, though if you wnt to boost your confidnc, "how to" books sldom do ny hrm. You cn kick-strt whol book with som littl writing xrcis.

3. Writ book you'd lik to rd. If you wouldn't rd it, why would nybody ls? Don't writ for prcivd udinc or mrkt. It my wll hv vnishd by th tim your book's rdy.

4. If you hv good story id, don't ssum it must form pros nrrtiv. It my work bttr s ply, scrnply or pom. B flxibl.

5. B wr tht nything tht pprs bfor "Chptr On" my b skippd. Don't put your vitl clu thr.

6. First prgrphs cn oftn b struck out. r you prforming hk, or just shuffling your ft?

7. Concntrt your nrrtiv nrgy on th point of chng. This is spcilly importnt for historicl fiction. Whn your chrctr is nw to plc, or things ltr round thm, tht's th point to stp bck nd fill in th dtils of thir world. Popl don't notic thir vrydy surroundings nd dily routin, so whn writrs dscrib thm it cn sound s if thy'r trying too hrd to instruct th rdr.

8. Dscription must work for its plc. It cn't b simply ornmntl. It -usully works bst if it hs humn lmnt; it is mor ffctiv if it coms from n implid viwpoint, rthr thn from th y of God. If dscription is colourd by th viwpoint of th chrctr who is doing th noticing, it bcoms, in ffct, prt of chrctr dfinition nd prt of th ction.

9. If you gt stuck, gt wy from your dsk. Tk wlk, tk bth, go to slp, mk pi, drw, listn to -music, mditt, xrcis; whtvr you do, don't just stick thr scowling t th problm. But don't mk tlphon clls or go to prty; if you do, othr popl's words will pour in whr your lost words should b. Opn gp for thm, crt spc. B ptint.

10. B rdy for nything. ch nw story hs diffrnt dmnds nd my throw up rsons to brk ths nd ll othr ruls. xcpt numbr on: you cn't giv your soul to litrtur if you'r thinking bout incom tx.

1. My first rul ws givn to m by TH Whit, uthor of Th Sword in th Ston nd othr rthurin fntsis nd ws: Rd. Rd vrything you cn ly hnds on. I lwys dvis popl who wnt to writ fntsy or scinc fiction or romnc to stop rding vrything in thos gnrs nd strt rding vrything ls from Bunyn to Bytt.

2. Find n uthor you dmir (min ws Conrd) nd copy thir plots nd chrctrs in ordr to tll your own story, just s popl lrn to drw nd pint by copying th mstrs.

3. Introduc your min chrctrs nd thms in th first third of your novl.

4. If you r writing plot-drivn gnr novl mk sur ll your mjor thms/plot lmnts r introducd in th first third, which you cn cll th introduction.

5. Dvlop your thms nd chrctrs in your scond third, th dvlopmnt.

6. Rsolv your thms, mystris nd so on in th finl third, th rsolution.

7. For good mlodrm study th fmous "Lstr Dnt mstr plot formul" which you cn find onlin. It ws writtn to show how to writ short story for th pulps, but cn b dptd succssfully for most storis of ny lngth or gnr.

8. If possibl hv somthing going on whil you hv your chrctrs dlivring xposition or philosophising. This hlps rtin drmtic tnsion.

9. Crrot nd stick – hv protgonists pursud (by n obsssion or villin) nd pursuing (id, objct, prson, mystry).

10. Ignor ll profrrd ruls nd crt your own, suitbl for wht you wnt to sy.

1. Dcid whn in th dy (or night) it bst suits you to writ, nd orgnis your lif ccordingly.

2. Think with your snss s wll s your brin.

3. Honour th mirculousnss of th ordinry.

4. Lock diffrnt chrctrs/lmnts in room nd tll thm to gt on.

5. Rmmbr thr is no such thing s nonsns.

6. Br in mind Wild's dictum tht "only mdiocritis dvlop" – nd -chllng it.

7. Lt your work stnd bfor dciding whthr or not to srv.

8. Think big nd sty prticulr.

9. Writ for tomorrow, not for tody.

10. Work hrd.

1. Rd lots.

2. Writ lots.

3. Lrn to b slf-criticl.

4. Lrn wht criticism to ccpt.

5. B prsistnt.

6. Hv story worth tlling.

7. Don't giv up.

8. Know th mrkt.

9. Gt lucky.

10. Sty lucky.

1. Don't look bck until you'v writtn n ntir drft, just bgin ch dy from th lst sntnc you wrot th prcding dy. This prvnts thos cringing flings, nd mns tht you hv substntil body of work bfor you gt down to th rl work which is ll in . . .

2. Th dit.

3. lwys crry notbook. nd I mn lwys. Th short-trm mmory only rtins informtion for thr minuts; unlss it is committd to ppr you cn los n id for vr.

4. Stop rding fiction – it's ll lis nywy, nd it dosn't hv nything to tll you tht you don't know lrdy (ssuming, tht is, you'v rd grt dl of fiction in th pst; if you hvn't you hv no businss whtsovr bing writr of fiction).

5. You know tht sickning fling of indqucy nd ovr-xposur you fl whn you look upon your own mpurpld pros? Rlx into th wrnss tht this ghstly snstion will nvr, vr lv you, no mttr how succssful nd publicly ludd you bcom. It is intrinsic to th rl businss of writing nd should b chrishd.

6. Liv lif nd writ bout lif. Of th mking of mny books thr is -indd no nd, but thr r mor thn nough books bout books.

7. By th sm tokn rmmbr how much tim popl spnd wtching TV. If you'r writing novl with contmporry stting thr nd to b long pssgs whr nothing hppns sv for TV wtching: "Ltr, Gorg wtchd Grnd Dsigns whil ting HobNobs. Ltr still h wtchd th shopping chnnl for whil . . ."

8. Th writing lif is ssntilly on of solitry confinmnt – if you cn't dl with this you ndn't pply.

9. Oh, nd not forgtting th occsionl bting dministrd by th sdistic gurds of th imgintion.

10. Rgrd yourslf s smll corportion of on. Tk yourslf off on tm-building xrciss (long wlks). Hold Christms prty vry yr t which you stnd in th cornr of your writing room, shouting vry loudly to yourslf whil drinking bottl of whit win. Thn msturbt undr th dsk. Th following dy you will fl dp nd cohring sns of mbrrssmnt.

1. Finish vrything you strt.

2. Gt on with it.

3. Sty in your mntl pyjms ll dy.

4. Stop fling sorry for yourslf.

5. No lcohol, sx or drugs whil you r working.

6. Work in th morning, short brk for lunch, work in th ftrnoon nd thn wtch th six o'clock nws nd thn go bck to work until bd-tim. Bfor bd, listn to Schubrt, prfrbly som songs.

7. If you hv to rd, to chr yourslf up rd biogrphis of writrs who wnt insn.

8. On Sturdys, you cn wtch n old Brgmn film, prfrbly Prson or utumn Sont.

9. No going to London.

10. No going nywhr ls ithr.

1. Forgt th boring old dictum "writ bout wht you know". Instd, sk out n unknown yt knowbl r of xprinc tht's going to nhnc your undrstnding of th world nd writ bout tht.

2. Nvrthlss, rmmbr tht in th prticulrity of your own lif lis th sdcorn tht will fd your imgintiv work. So don't throw it ll wy on utobiogrphy. (Thr r quit nough writrs' mmoirs out thr lrdy.)

3. Nvr b stisfid with first drft. In fct, nvr b stisfid with your own stuff t ll, until you'r crtin it's s good s your finit powrs cn nbl it to b.

4. Listn to th criticisms nd prfrncs of your trustd "first rdrs".

5. Whn n id coms, spnd silnt tim with it. Rmmbr Kts's id of Ngtiv Cpbility nd Kipling's dvic to "drift, wit nd oby". long with your gthring of hrd dt, llow yourslf lso to drm your id into bing.

6. In th plnning stg of book, don't pln th nding. It hs to b rnd by ll tht will go bfor it.

7. Rspct th wy chrctrs my chng onc thy'v got 50 pgs of lif in thm. Rvisit your pln t this stg nd s whthr crtin things hv to b ltrd to tk ccount of ths chngs.

8. If you'r writing historicl fiction, don't hv wll-known rl chrctrs s your min protgonists. This will only crt biogrphicl uns in th rdrs nd snd thm bck to th history books. If you must writ bout rl popl, thn do somthing post-modrn nd plyful with thm.

9. Lrn from cinm. B conomic with dscriptions. Sort out th tlling dtil from th liflss on. Writ dilogu tht popl would ctully spk.

10. Nvr bgin th book whn you fl you wnt to bgin it, but hold off whil longr.

1. Rd lik md. But try to do it nlyticlly – which cn b hrd, bcus th bttr nd mor complling novl is, th lss conscious you will b of its dvics. It's worth trying to figur thos dvics out, howvr: thy might com in usful in your own work. I find wtching films lso instructiv. Nrly vry modrn Hollywood blockbustr is hoplssly long nd bggy. Trying to visulis th much bttr films thy would hv bn with fw rdicl cuts is grt xrcis in th rt of story-tlling. Which lds m on to . . .

2. Cut lik crzy. Lss is mor. I'v -oftn rd mnuscripts – including my own – whr I'v got to th bginning of, sy, chptr two nd hv thought: "This is whr th novl should ctully strt." hug mount of informtion bout chrctr nd bckstory cn b convyd through smll dtil. Th motionl ttchmnt you fl to scn or chptr will fd s you mov on to othr storis. B businss-lik bout it. In fct . . .

3. Trt writing s job. B disciplind. Lots of writrs gt bit OCD-ish bout this. Grhm Grn fmously wrot 500 words dy. Jn Plidy mngd 5,000 bfor lunch, thn spnt th ftrnoon nswring fn mil. My minimum is 1,000 words dy – which is somtims sy to chiv, nd is somtims, frnkly, lik shitting brick, but I will mk myslf sty t my dsk until I'v got thr, bcus I know tht by doing tht I m inching th book forwrd. Thos 1,000 words might wll b rubbish – thy oftn r. But thn, it is lwys sir to rturn to rubbish words t ltr dt nd mk thm bttr.

4. Writing fiction is not "slf--xprssion" or "thrpy". Novls r for rdrs, nd writing thm mns th crfty, ptint, slflss construction of ffcts. I think of my novls s bing somthing lik firground rids: my job is to strp th rdr into thir cr t th strt of chptr on, thn trundl nd whizz thm through scns nd surpriss, on crfully plnnd rout, nd t finly nginrd pc.

5. Rspct your chrctrs, vn th -minor ons. In rt, s in lif, vryon is th hro of thir own prticulr story; it is worth thinking bout wht your minor chrctrs' storis r, vn though thy my intrsct only slightly with your protgonist's. t th sm tim . . .

6. Don't ovrcrowd th nrrtiv. Chrctrs should b individulisd, but functionl – lik figurs in pinting. Think of Hironymus Bosch's Christ Mockd, in which ptintly suffring Jsus is closly surroundd by four thrtning mn. ch of th chrctrs is uniqu, nd yt ch rprsnts typ; nd collctivly thy form nrrtiv tht is ll th mor powrful for bing so tightly nd so conomiclly constructd. On similr thm . . .

7. Don't ovrwrit. void th rdundnt phrss, th distrcting djctivs, th unncssry dvrbs. Bginnrs, spcilly, sm to think tht writing fiction nds spcil kind of flowry pros, compltly unlik ny sort of lngug on might ncountr in dy-to-dy lif. This is mispprhnsion bout how th ffcts of fiction r producd, nd cn b displld by obying Rul 1. To rd som of th work of Colm Tóibín or Cormc McCrthy, for xmpl, is to discovr how dlibrtly limitd vocbulry cn produc n stonishing motionl punch.

8. Pc is crucil. Fin writing isn't nough. Writing studnts cn b grt t producing singl pg of wll-crftd pros; wht thy somtims lck is th bility to tk th rdr on journy, with ll th chngs of trrin, spd nd mood tht long journy involvs. gin, I find tht looking t films cn hlp. Most novls will wnt to mov clos, lingr, mov bck, mov on, in prtty cinmtic wys.

9. Don't pnic. Midwy through writing novl, I hv rgulrly xprincd momnts of bowl-curdling trror, s I contmplt th drivl on th scrn bfor m nd s byond it, in quick succssion, th drisiv rviws, th frinds' mbrrssmnt, th filing crr, th dwindling incom, th rpossssd hous, th divorc . . . Working doggdly on through criss lik ths, howvr, hs lwys got m thr in th nd. Lving th dsk for whil cn hlp. Tlking th problm through cn hlp m rcll wht I ws trying to chiv bfor I got stuck. Going for long wlk lmost lwys gts m thinking bout my mnuscript in slightly nw wy. nd if ll ls fils, thr's pryr. St Frncis d Sls, th ptron sint of writrs, hs oftn hlpd m out in crisis. If you wnt to sprd your nt mor widly, you could try ppling to Clliop, th mus of pic potry, too.

10. Tlnt trumps ll. If you'r -rlly grt writr, non of ths ruls nd pply. If Jms Bldwin hd flt th nd to whip up th pc bit, h could nvr hv chivd th xtndd lyricl intnsity of Giovnni's Room. Without "ovrwrittn" pros, w would hv non of th linguistic xubrnc of Dickns or n ngl Crtr. If vryon ws conomicl with thir chrctrs, thr would b no Wolf Hll . . . For th rst of us, howvr, ruls rmin importnt. nd, -crucilly, only by undrstnding wht thy'r for nd how thy work cn you bgin to xprimnt with brking thm.

1. Turn up for work. Disciplin llows crtiv frdom. No disciplin quls no frdom.

2. Nvr stop whn you r stuck. You my not b bl to solv th problm, but turn sid nd writ somthing ls. Do not stop ltogthr.

3. Lov wht you do.

4. B honst with yourslf. If you r no good, ccpt it. If th work you r -doing is no good, ccpt it.

5. Don't hold on to poor work. If it ws bd whn it wnt in th drwr it will b just s bd whn it coms out.

6. Tk no notic of nyon you don't rspct.

7. Tk no notic of nyon with -gndr gnd. lot of mn still think tht womn lck imgintion of th firy kind.

8. B mbitious for th work nd not for th rwrd.

9. Trust your crtivity.

10. njoy this work!

Mny popl hv mild m sking wht dvic I might offr to n spiring writr. Hr r fw thoughts. lot mor could b sid, obviously, but I hop you'll find th following usful:

Rd, rd, rd. Rd widly nd vorciously. Sinc you'r looking t my wb pg, you probbly hv n intrst in scinc fiction or fntsy (SF/F). Sk out th bst in th fild. (Look t my rcommndd rding list but only s strt; it dosn't vn prtnd to b xhustiv.) Rd th clssics, both SF nd othr. I wish I'd rd mor of th non-SF clssics whn I ws in school.

Prctic, prctic, prctic writing. Writing is crft tht rquirs both tlnt nd cquird skills. You lrn by doing, by mking mistks nd thn sing whr you wnt wrong. Short storis r good trining ground nd n sir mrkt to brk into.

If you'r wondring bout cours to pursu in collg, nd you think you wnt crr in writing, choos th school tht you think will giv you th bst ll-round xprinc. Much of wht I lrnd in collg I lrnd outsid th clssroom. Study wht intrsts you (though it dosn't hurt to gt som trining for work tht pys slry!). Wht do you fl pssiont bout? Pursu it! You don't nd crtifict to writ; you do nd slf-disciplin nd innr fir.

Writ from th soul, not from som notion bout wht you think th mrktplc wnts. Th mrkt is fickl; th soul is trnl.

If you cn stnd th thought of not writing, don't ttmpt crr s writr. It's difficult nd oftn pinful. Don't subjct yourslf to it unlss you r drivn by pssion for it. If you find this too discourging, you probbly shouldn't im to b profssionl writr. But nothing sys you cn't b hppy mtur. (Rmmbr, th root of th word "mtur" is mr, to lov.)

Don't pln on mking lot of mony from your writing. survy by Th uthors Guild fw yrs go found tht th vrg uthor rnd bout $4000 yr from his or hr writing. Tht ws gnrl survy, but vn in th gnrs, thr r plnty of popl struggling--mny of thm quit good writrs. If you mk it into print, you r doing wll. If you succd in brking out commrcilly, you'll b mong th xtrmly fortunt fw.

Sk out constructiv fdbck on your work. Tk suggstions sriously, nd lrn from thm. Not ll criticisms will b on th mrk, but vn thos tht rn't cn hlp you spot problms tht nd ttntion. You must dcid for yourslf which suggstions to tk, nd which to lv. Writing workshops cn b invlubl--not just to th spiring writr but lso to th working profssionl. I hv blongd to locl writing group for ovr twnty yrs, nd thy critiqu vry pic of work I do bfor it gos to publishr. My writing is fr bttr for it. Thr r numrous onlin workshops vilbl, both on th Intrnt nd on th big commrcil srvics. S my rcommndd rding list for guidbook to writing workshops.

If your work is of publishbl qulity, soonr or ltr it will sll. Probbly. Thr r no gurnts, of cours. I'v got som pics of my own in th trunk tht I thought would sll, but didn't. But tht's wht kps us going--th blif tht wht w r doing is worth it. Pls not: mny popl think thir work is of publishbl qulity whn it isn't, t lst not yt. Tht's why it's so importnt to gt good, objctiv fdbck--nd to ct on th fdbck to improv your work. Only you cn dcid whthr your fith in your own bilitis is nough to gt you through th lrning curv.

Don't snd m your mnuscripts. I cn't rd thm. I'm not n ditor, nd I'm busy trying to rn living myslf. Nor cn I find you n gnt or publishr. You'v got to do your own lgwork. I know how hrd it is, but thr's just no othr wy. S Gtting Publishd for mor on slling your work.

Sk out good sourcs of informtion. Thr r mny fin books on writing, som of thm gnrl nd som spcificlly orintd towrd writing SF/F. Th SFW (Scinc-Fiction nd Fntsy Writrs of mric) wb pg hs links to numrous writr-frindly rsourcs on th nt, nd t th bottom of this pg you'll find numbr, s wll. Your librry hs mny rsourcs, lso. sk to s Th Litrry Mrktplc, which lists both publishrs nd gnts.

B dtrmind, nd b thick-skinnd. I collctd rjction slips for 6 yrs bfor I finlly sold my first short story. Why did I kp going? Ws I crzy? Probbly. I ws convincd I could do it, nd I rfusd to tk no for n nswr.

Onc you dcid you'r rdy to bgin submitting to publishrs, I suggst th following rul:

lwys hv th nxt mrkt in mind. If your story coms bck with rjction not, don't tk it prsonlly or stw bout it. GT IT IN TH MIL TO NOTHR MRKT THT SM DY. (Thn you cn go bck to whtvr it is you wr doing, prfrbly writing th nxt story.)

Chck out som of th rsourcs listd blow. Good luck, nd I look forwrd to sing your work in print!

1. Writ th story you'd most wnt to rd. Don't writ story just bcus you think it might b bstsllr or tht it would mk Grt unt dn proud. Think bout th books you lov, th ons you rlly los yourslf in. If thos r mystris, thn don't try to writ n historicl romnc or quit litrry novl. It might not b nything gnr-spcific tht you lov, but crtin voic, or typ of story, or kinds of chrctrs. Writ wht you lov. Do m fvor — right now, tody, strt list of ll your crzy obsssions, th things tht gt your hrt pumping, tht wk you up in th middl of th night. Put it bov your dsk nd us it to guid you, to jumpstrt your writing ch nd vry dy.

2. Bgin with chrctr. Mk hr flwd nd blivbl. Lt hr liv nd brth nd giv hr th frdom to surpris you nd tk th story in unxpctd dirctions. If sh's not surprising you, you cn bt sh'll sm flt to your rdrs. On xrcis I lwys do whn I'm gtting to know chrctr is sk hr to tll m hr scrts. Sit down with pn nd ppr nd strt with, "I nvr told nybody…" nd go from thr, writing in th voic of your chrctr.

3. Giv tht chrctr complling problm. Your chrctr hs to hv somthing tht's going to chllng hr, tormnt hr nd propl hr forwrd. t th hrt of vry story is conflict – whthr xtrnl or intrnl, mk it good on, nd rmmbr tht this problm is going to shp your chrctr, lving hr forvr chngd.

4. Mk things hppn! You cn hv th grtst chrctrs in th world, nd writ butifully, but if nothing's hppning, th story flls on its fc prtty quickly. In my books, I mk sur somthing importnt to th plot is hppning in ch scn. nd if thr's scn in thr tht isn't hlping to mov th story long in som vitl wy, I cut it, no mttr how grt it is. Whn I'm diting, I'll go scn by scn nd writ singl word sntnc dscribing th ction on n indx crd. Thn I ly th crds out nd I'v got

th br bons of my story. I cn s if things r moving forwrd, if I'm throwing in nough twists nd turns, nd if thr r scns tht just rn't pulling thir wight.

5. Mk it blivbl. h, you sy, but you somtims writ storis with ghosts nd firis – how blivbl is tht? It works if you mk it blivbl in th univrs of th book. In Promis Not to Tll, I cm up with ruls for th ghost – things sh could nd couldn't do. I gv hr history nd complling rson to rturn. Rdrs ht chp tricks. Don't pull th vil twin routin in th finl hour. Don't bring in nw chrctr t th nd to solv th protgonist's problm for hr. Sh's got to rsolv things hrslf, for bttr or wors.

6. Stick with it th projct. You'll b tmptd to giv up thousnd nd on tims. Don't. Finish th story. Thn work twic s hrd to rvis it. Do your bst to gt it out in th world. Whn it's rjctd by gnts nd publishrs (which it will b) kp snding it out. In th mntim, writ nothr. Thn nothr. Trust m, you gt bttr vry tim. You'r not in this writing businss bcus it's sy. It took m four books, two gnts nd svn yrs to gt my first novl publishd. It ws long tough rod, but so, so worth it in th nd!

7. nd lstly: Ignor th ruls. (Including min.) vryon's got dvic nd thoris; popl wnt to pigonhol you, put you in gnr with its own ruls nd convntions. I think th work coms out bttr whn w lv ll tht bhind; whn th only thing to b tru to is th writing.

Hving troubl mking th scns in your novl work thir mgic? In this rticl, I'll show you how to writ th "prfct" scn.

Myb you think it's impossibl to writ th prfct scn. ftr ll, who cn choos vry word prfctly, vry thought, vry sntnc, vry prgrph? Wht dos prfction mn, nywy?

Honstly, I don't know. Prfction is in th y of th bholdr. Styl is mttr of tst.

But structur is prtty wll undrstood. Myb you cn't writ th prfctlystyld scn. But you cn writ th prfctly structurd scn. nd tht's whl of lot bttr thn writing bdly structurd scn.

scn hs two lvls of structur, nd only two. Thy r:

Th lrg-scl structur of th scn
Th smll-scl structur of th scn
This my sm obvious, but by th nd of this rticl, I hop to convinc you tht it's trribly profound. If you thn wnt to fling lrg quntitis of csh t m in grtitud, pls don't. I'd rlly rthr hv chck. With plnty of zros. I m going to stl insights from Dwight Swin's book, Tchniqus of th Slling Writr. This is quit simply th finst book vr writtn on how to writ fiction. If you don't hv this book, you r robbing yourslf blind. I will b giving you th high points in this rticl, but thr is rlly no substitut for rding th book nd digsting it.

Bfor w bgin, w nd to undrstnd how w kp scor. How do w know wht prfction is? Th nswr is bsd on undrstnding your rdr's motivtion for rding.

Your rdr is rding your fiction bcus you provid him or hr with powrful motionl xprinc. If you'r writing romnc, you must crt in your rdr th illusion tht sh is flling in lov hrslf. If you'r writing thrillr, you must crt in your rdr th illusion tht h is in mortl dngr nd hs only th tinist chnc of sving his lif (nd ll of humnity). If you'r writing fntsy, you must crt in your rdr th illusion tht sh is ctully in nothr world whr ll is diffrnt nd wondrful nd mgicl. nd so on for ll th othr gnrs.

If you fil to crt ths motions in your rdr, thn you hv fild. If you crt ths motions in your rdr, thn you hv succdd. Th bttr you crt th dsird motionl xprinc in your rdr, th bttr your fiction. Prfction in writing coms whn you hv crtd th fullst possibl motionl xprinc for your rdr.

Lrg-Scl Structur of Scn
Th lrg-scl structur of scn is xtrmly simpl. ctully, thr r two possibl choics you cn mk for your scn structur. Dwight Swin clls ths two choics "scns" nd "squls". This is horrndously confusing, sinc both of ths r wht most ordinry popl cll scns. In wht follows, I'm going to cpitliz ths trms, clling thm Scns nd Squls. Tht is your signl tht I'm using Swin's lngug. Whn I us th word "scn" in th ordinry non-Swin sns, I'll lv it uncpitlizd. Sinc you

xcptionlly brillint nd prcptiv, you will not find this problm. Lt m giv you th high points on Scns nd Squls right up front.

Scn hs th following thr-prt pttrn:

Gol
Conflict
Disstr
Squl hs th following thr-prt pttrn:

Rction
Dilmm
Dcision
You my think ths pttrns r too simpl. You my think this is rducing writing to Pint-by-Numbrs. Wll, no. This is rducing fiction to th two pttrns tht hv bn provn by thousnds of novlists to ctully work. Thr r plnty of othr pttrns popl us. Thy typiclly work lss wll. It my wll b tht thr r othr pttrns tht work bttr. If you cn find on tht works bttr, pls tll m. But for now, lt's prtnd tht Dwight Swin is right. Lt's prtnd ths r bsolutly th bst possibl pttrns for writing fiction. Lt's prtnd ths r th kys to writing th prfct scn. Lt's mov on nd look t ch of ths in turn.

s w sid, th Scn hs th thr prts Gol, Conflict, nd Disstr. ch of ths is suprmly importnt. I m going to dfin ch of ths pics nd thn xplin why ch is criticl to th structur of th Scn. I ssum tht you hv slctd on chrctr to b your Point Of Viw chrctr. In wht follows, I'll rfr to this chrctr s your POV chrctr. Your gol is to convincingly show your POV chrctr xprincing th scn. You must do this so powrfully tht your rdr xprincs th scn s if sh wr th POV chrctr.

Gol: Gol is wht your POV chrctr wnts t th bginning of th Scn. Th Gol must b spcific nd it must b clrly dfinbl. Th rson your POV chrctr must hv Gol is tht it mks your chrctr proctiv. Your chrctr is not pssivly witing for th univrs to dl him Grt Good. Your chrctr is going ftr wht h wnts, just s your rdr wishs h could do. It's simpl fct tht ny chrctr who

wnts somthing dsprtly is n intrsting chrctr. vn if h's not nic, h's intrsting. nd your rdr will idntify with him. Tht's wht you wnt s writr.
Conflict: Conflict is th sris of obstcls your POV chrctr fcs on th wy to rching his Gol. You must hv Conflict in your Scn! If your POV chrctr rchs his Gol with no Conflict, thn th rdr is bord. Your rdr wnts to struggl! No victory hs ny vlu if it coms too sy. So mk your POV chrctr struggl nd your rdr will liv out tht struggl too.
Disstr: Disstr is filur to lt your POV chrctr rch his Gol. Don't giv him th Gol! Winning is boring! Whn Scn nds in victory, your rdr fls no rson to turn th pg. If things r going wll, your rdr might s wll go to bd. No! Mk somthing wful hppn. Hng your POV chrctr off cliff nd your rdr will turn th pg to s wht hppns nxt.
Tht's ll! Thr is litrlly nothing mor you nd to know bout Scns. Now lt's look t Squls . . .

Th Squl hs th thr prts Rction, Dilmm, nd Dcision. gin, ch of ths is criticl to successful Squl. Rmov ny of thm nd th Squl fils to work. Lt m dd on importnt point hr. Th purpos of Squl is to follow ftr Scn. Scn nds on Disstr, nd you cn't immditly follow tht up with nw Scn, which bgins with Gol. Why? Bcus whn you'v just bn sluggd with srious stbck, you cn't just rush out nd try somthing nw. You'v got to rcovr. Tht's bsic psychology.
Rction: Rction is th motionl follow-through to Disstr. Whn somthing wful hppns, you'r stggring for whil, off-blnc, out of kiltr. You cn't hlp it. So show your POV chrctr rcting viscrlly to his Disstr. Show him hurting. Giv your rdr chnc to hurt with your chrctrs. You my nd to show som pssg of tim. This is not tim for ction, it's tim for r-ction. tim to wp. But you cn't stggr round in pin forvr. In rl lif, if popl do tht thy los thir frinds. In fiction, if you do it, you los your rdrs. vntully, your POV chrctr nds to gt grip. To tk stock. To look for options. nd th problm is tht thr rn't ny . . .

Dilmm: Dilmm is sitution with no good options. If your Disstr ws rl Disstr, thr rn't ny good choics. Your POV chrctr must hv rl dilmm. This givs your rdr chnc to worry, which is good. Your rdr must b wondring wht cn possibly hppn nxt. Lt your POV chrctr work through th choics. Lt him sort things out. vntully, lt him com to th lst-bd option . . .
Dcision: Dcision is th ct of mking choic mong svrl options. This is importnt, bcus it lts your POV chrctr bcom proctiv gin. Popl who nvr mk dcisions r boring popl. Thy wit

round for sombody ls to dcid. nd nobody wnts to rd bout sombody lik tht. So mk your chrctr dcid, nd mk it good dcision. Mk it on your rdr cn rspct. Mk it risky, but mk it hv chnc of working. Do tht, nd your rdr will hv to turn th pg, bcus now your POV chrctr hs nw Gol.

nd now you'v com full circl. You'v gon from Scn to Squl nd bck to th Gol for nw Scn. This is why th Scn-Squl pttrn is so powrful. Scn lds nturlly to Squl, which lds nturlly to nw Scn. nd so on forvr. t som point, you'll nd th cycl. You'll giv your POV chrctr ithr Ultimt Victory or Ultimt Dft nd tht will b th nd of th book. But until you gt thr, th ltrnting pttrn of Scn nd Squl will crry you through. nd your rdr will curs you whn h discovrs tht h's spnt th whol doggon night rding your book bcus h could not put th thing down.

Tht's prfction.

Howvr, it's only hlf th bttl. I'v told you how to dsign th Scns nd Squls in th lrg scl. But you still nd to writ thm. You nd to writ prgrph ftr complling prgrph, with ch on lding your POV chrctr smoothly through from initil Gol to knuckl-whitning Conflict to bon-jrring Disstr, nd thn through viscrl Rction to horribl Dilmm nd finlly on to clvr Dcision.

How do you do tht? How do you xcut thos prgrphs? How do you do it prfctly?

Smll-Scl Structur of Scn

Th nswr is to us wht Dwight Swin clls "Motivtion-Rction Units." H clls thm MRUs for short. This is such n bsurdly ridiculous trm tht I'm going to kp it, just to prov tht Mr. Swin ws not prfct. Writing MRUs is hrd. Howvr, I'v found tht it provids th most bng for th buck in improving your writing. I'v mntord mny writrs, nd univrsl problm for thm ws th filur to writ MRUs corrctly. My solution ws to mk thm pinfully work through svrl chptrs so tht ch on ws nothing mor nor lss thn string of prfct MRUs. ftr fw chptrs, th tchniqu gts sir. Thn I mliciously rquir thm to rwrit thir whol novl this wy. This is brutlly hrd work, but thos who hv survivd it hv bcom much bttr writrs.

Writing MRUs corrctly is th mgic ky to complling fiction. I don't cr if you bliv m or not. Try it nd s.

I hop you r slivting to lrn this mgicl tool. You nd to first suffr through on full prgrph of thory. I know you will do this bcus you r intllignt nd ptint nd bcus I m flttring you quit thickly.

You will writ your MRUs by ltrnting btwn wht your POV chrctr ss (th Motivtion) nd wht h dos (th Rction). This is suprmly importnt. Rmmbr tht Swin clls ths things "Motivtion-Rction Units". Th Motivtion is objctiv but it is somthing tht your chrctr cn s (or hr or smll or tst or fl). You will writ this in such wy tht your rdr lso ss it (or hrs it or smlls it or tsts it or fls it). You will thn strt nw prgrph in which your POV chrctr dos on or mor things in Rction to th Motivtion. Thr is n xct squnc you must follow in writing your Rction. Th squnc is bsd on wht is physiologiclly possibl. Not tht th Motivtion is xtrnl nd objctiv. Th Rction is intrnl nd subjctiv. If you do this, you crt in your rdr th powrful illusion tht h is xprincing somthing rl. Now lt's brk this down into mor dtil . . .

Th Motivtion is xtrnl nd objctiv, nd you prsnt it tht wy, in objctiv, xtrnl trms. You do this in singl prgrph. It dos not nd to b complictd.
Hr is simpl xmpl:

Th tigr droppd out of th tr nd sprng towrd Jck.

Not th ky points hr. This is objctiv. W prsnt th Motivtion s it would b shown by vidocmr. Nothing hr indicts tht w r in Jck's point of viw. Tht coms nxt, but in th Motivtion w kp it simpl nd shrp nd cln.

Th Rction is intrnl nd subjctiv, nd you prsnt it tht wy, xctly s your POV chrctr would xprinc it — from th insid. This is your chnc to mk your rdr b your POV chrctr. To rpt myslf, this must hppn in its own prgrph (or squnc of prgrphs). If you lv it in th sm prgrph s th Motivtion, thn you risk whip-swing th rdr. Which no rdr njoys.

Th Rction is mor complx thn th Motivtion. Th rson is tht it is intrnl, nd intrnl procsss hppn on diffrnt tim-scls. Whn you s tigr, in th first millisconds, you only hv tim for on thing — fr. Within fw tnths of scond, you hv tim to rct on instinct, but tht is ll it will b — instinct, rflx. But shortly ftr tht first rflxiv rction, you will lso hv tim to rct rtionlly, to ct, to think, to spk. You must prsnt th full complx of your chrctr's rctions in this ordr, from fstst tim-scl to slowst. If you put thm out of ordr, thn things just don't fl right. You dstroy th illusion of rlity. nd your rdr won't kp rding bcus your writing is "not rlistic." vn if you got ll your fcts right.

Hr is simpl xmpl:

bolt of rw drnlin shot through Jck's vins. H jrkd his rifl to his shouldr, sightd on th tigr's hrt, nd squzd th triggr. "Di, you bstrd!"

Now lt's nlyz this. Not th thr prts of th Rction:

Fling: " bolt of rw drnlin shot through Jck's vins." You show this first, bcus it hppns lmost instntly.
Rflx: "H jrkd his rifl to his shouldr . . ." You show this scond, s rsult of th fr. n instinctiv rsult tht rquirs no conscious thought.

Rtionl ction nd Spch: ". . . sightd on th tigr's hrt, nd squzd th triggr. 'Di, you bstrd!'" You put this lst, whn Jck hs hd tim to think nd ct in rtionl wy. H pulls th triggr, rtionl rspons to th dngr. H spks, rtionl xprssion of his intns motionl rction.

It is lgitimt to lv out on or two of ths thr prts. (You cn't lv out ll thr or you hv no Rction.) But thr is on criticl rul to follow in lving prts out: Whtvr prts you kp in must b in th corrct ordr. If thr is Fling, it must com first. If thr is Rflx, it must nvr com bfor Fling. If thr is som Rtionl ction, it must lwys com lst. This is simpl nd obvious nd if you follow this rul, your Rctions will b prfctly structurd tim ftr tim.

nd ftr th Rction coms . . . nothr Motivtion. This is th ky. You cn't fford to writ on prfct MRU nd thn b hppy. You'v got to writ nothr nd nothr nd nothr. Th Rction you just wrot will ld to som nw Motivtion tht is gin xtrnl nd objctiv nd which you will writ in its own prgrph. Just to continu th xmpl w'v crtd so fr:

Th bullt grzd th tigr's lft shouldr. Blood squirtd out of th jggd wound. Th tigr rord nd stggrd, thn lpd in th ir stright t Jck's throt.

Not tht th Motivtion cn b complx or it cn b simpl. Th only rquirmnt is tht it b xtrnl nd objctiv, somthing tht not only Jck cn s nd hr nd fl but which ny othr obsrvr could lso s nd hr nd fl, if thy wr thr.

Th importnt thing is to kp th ltrnting pttrn. You writ Motivtion nd thn Rction nd thn nothr Motivtion nd thn nothr Rction. Whn you run out of Motivtions or Rctions, your Scn or Squl is ovr. Don't run out too soon. Don't drg on too long.

Writ ch Scn nd Squl s squnc of MRUs. ny prt of yourScn or Squl which is not n MRU must go. Cut it ruthlssly. Show no mrcy. You cn not fford chrity for singl sntnc tht is not pulling its wight. nd th only prts of your scn tht pull thir wight r th MRUs. ll ls is fluff.

bout Thos Psky Ruls

You my b fling tht it's impossibl to writ your scns following ths ruls. Doing so cuss you to frz. You str blindly t th computr scrn, frid to mov muscl for fr of brking Rul. Oh dr, you'v got yourslf cs of writr's block. Tht's bd. Now lt m tll you th finl scrt for writing th prfct scn.

Forgt ll ths ruls. Tht's right, ignor th vrmints. Just writ your chptr in your usul wy, putting down ny old words you wnt, in ny old wy you fl lik. Thr, tht fls bttr, dosn't it? You r crting, nd tht's good. Crtion is constructing story from nothing. It's hrd work, it's fun, it's xciting, it's unstructurd. It's imprfct. Do it without rgrd for th ruls.

Whn you hv finishd crting, st it sid for whil. You will ltr nd to dit it, but now is not th tim. Do somthing ls. Writ nothr scn. Go bowling. Spnd tim with thos nnoying popl who liv in your hous. Rmmbr thm? Your fmily nd frinds? Do somthing tht is Not Writing.

Ltr on, whn you r rdy, com bck nd rd your Grt Pic of Writing. It will hv mny nic points to it, but it will not b prfctly structurd. Now you r rdy to dit it nd impos prfct structur on it. This is diffrnt procss thn Crtion. This is nlysis, nd it is th opposit of Crtion. nlysis is dstruction. You must now tk it prt nd put it bck togthr.

nlyz th scn you hv writtn. Is it Scn or Squl? Or nithr? If it is nithr, thn you must find wy to mk it on or th othr or you must throw it wy. If it is Scn, vrify tht it hs Gol, Conflict, nd Disstr. Idntify thm ch in on-sntnc summry. Likwis, if it's Squl, vrify tht it hs Rction, Dilmm, nd Dcision. Idntify ch of ths in on-sntnc summry. If you cn't put th scn into on of ths two structurs, thn throw th scn wy s th worthlss pic of drivl tht it is. You my somdy find us for it s sonnt or limrick or tchnicl mnul, but it is not fiction nd thr is no wy to mk it fiction, so gt rid of it.
Now tht you know wht your scn is, ithr Scn or Squl, rwrit it MRU by MRU. Mk sur vry Motivtion is sprtd from vry Rction by prgrph brk. It is oky to hv multipl prgrphs for singl Motivtion or singl Rction. It is cpitl crim to mix thm in singl prgrph. Whn thy r sprtd corrctly, you my find you hv xtr prts tht r nithr Motivtion nor Rction. Throw thm wy, no mttr how butiful or clvr thy r. Thy r not fiction nd you r writing fiction.

xmin ch Motivtion nd mk sur tht it is ntirly objctiv nd xtrnl. Show no mrcy. You cn not fford mrcy on nything tht poisons your fiction. Kill it or it will kill you.

Now idntify th lmnts of ch Rction nd mk sur thy r s subjctiv nd intrnl s possibl. Prsnt thm s nrly s you cn from insid th skin of your POV chrctr. Mk sur thy r in th corrct ordr, with Flings first, thn Rflxiv ctions, nd finlly Rtionl ctions nd Spch. gin, limint vrything ls, vn brillint insights tht would surly gt you Nobl pc priz. Brillint insights r vry fin, but if thy rn't fiction, thy don't blong in your fiction. If you cn contriv to rrrng such thing to b in

corrct fictionl pttrn, thn fin. Kp it. Othrwis, slit its vil throt nd throw th crcss to th wolvs. You r novlist, nd tht's wht novlists do.

Whn you rch th nd of th scn, whthr it is Scn or Squl, chck to mk sur tht vrything is corrctly plcd in n MRU nd ll crcsss r thrown out. Fl fr to dit th scn for styl, clrity, wit, splling, grmmr, nd ny othr thing you know how to do. Whn you r don, pt yourslf on th bck.

You hv writtn prfct scn. ll is wll in your world. You r don with this scn.

Now go do it gin nd gin until you finish your book.

Thr r million wys to crippl story. Hr r fiv of thm.

Thr's bsolutly nothing wrong with bing inxprincd (w'v ll bn thr). Unlss it shows up in your story in wy tht dtrcts from it.

Or kills it.

Pop quiz: which is th mor unforgiving udinc: gnts, ditors, or rdrs?

Usd to b tht th only nswrs tht mttrd wr th first two, bcus you'd nvr gt your work in front of th lttr if your story ws guilty of nd of ths fiv dl killrs. Thy wr grounds for rjction.

Nowdys, though, you cn skip th grouchy gnts nd rjction-hppy cquisitions ditors nd go digitlly dirct to th mrktplc. nd if for momnt you think tht this brv nw world lowrs th crft br, tht digitl rdrs won't cr bout th smll stuff in th sm wy tht gnts nd ditors do, think gin.

This is ctully good nws.

Bcus whn you finlly conqur ths fiv dmons, you'll stnd out s profssionl storytllr worthy of publiction – vn if you'r slf-publishing – midst s of comptition tht, quit frnkly, isn't.Without word-of-mouth buzz, your digitl story is going nowhr byond your circl of loyl fmily nd frinds. nd with ths fiv flws crippling your pgs, widr rdrship isn't likly.

Not just bcus of th tchnicl improprity of it. But bcus th writr who dosn't rcogniz th folly of ths things isn't likly to spin story tht compts with thos of writrs who do.

Hr thy r, in no prticulr ordr of toxicity.

1. Propr Nms Within Dilogu
Which quts to bd dilogu.

Listn closly to convrstions in your lif. Count th numbr of tims sombody uss your nm in thos udibl xchngs. Bttr yt, how oftn you us th nm of th prson you r tlking to, ithr fc to fc or on th phon.

It'll b low numbr. It is likly to b zro.

nd yt, som writrs sm to think this sounds cool whn writtn into dilogu. To wit:

Hy, Bob, good to s you.

You too, Jo. Bn wll?

Bob, you hv no id.

Wll Jo, tims r tough.

Tll m bout it, Bob. I hr you, mn.

Only bit of n xggrtion hr. I s this ll th tim in th mnuscripts I'm hird to critiqu nd coch. If it only hppnd onc it might fly undr th rdr – bcus it dos hppn, onc in blu moon, in rl lif, nd it sounds odd thn, too – but usully whn it pprs it pops up throughout th ntir mnuscript lik skin rsh.

Rul of thumb: nvr do this in your dilogu. Nvr.

With xprinc coms n r for dilogu. But you cn shortn tht lrning curv drmticlly by simply xing out th us of propr nms.

Unlss somon is clling on th phon nd opns with, "Is Mry thr?", don't mk this mistk.
2. Chit-Cht

Willim Goldmn, th snior sttsmn of scrnwriting who is lso n ccomplishd novlist, dviss us to bgin our scns t th lst possibl momnt.

This is hug. Som of th bst dvic vr, vn for novlists. Bcus implicit within its gnius is th ssumption – th prrquisit – tht th writr compltly knows th mission of ch nd vry scn.

Rd tht gin, it cn chng your ntir storytlling xprinc.

Skip th plsntris whn two popl mt. void th wthr tlk. Th how-hv-you-bns. Instd, opt for somthing lik this:

ftr fw minuts of ctching up Lur poppd th qustion sh'd com for.

"r you hving n ffir with my husbnd?" sh skd.

Th first of thos two lins cn rplc mny prgrphs of uslss chit-cht. vn whn sid chit-cht dmonstrts chrctriztion, without xpositionl vlu it's uslss distrction tht ts wy t pc. nd pc is lwys importnt.

Chrctriztion whn it counts trumps chrctriztion whn it dosn't, vry tim.

I'v rd pgs upon pgs of chit-cht bfor scn finlly kicks in. I'v sn ntir scns full of it without th scn vr rriving t point. nd I hv to rmind myslf tht I'm gtting pid to rd it.

But nvr in th story of n ccomplishd pro.

It's judgmnt cll, nd with xprinc coms n volvd sns of pc nd rdr tolrnc.

3. Too Much Dscription of Food

This is mor common thn you cn imgin mong nwr writrs. Mls r dscribd with xquisit dtil. Cours ftr cours, drnchd with spicy, worshipful djctivs.

Dlicious. Stming hot. Slthrd in swt suc.

Th only justifiction for doing this is whn th ml is lcd with rsnic. Bcus – nd I'm srious bout tht nlogy – bcus in such cs it would rlt to th story.

If it dosn't rlt, skip it.

Nobody crs wht your hro hs for brkfst. It's not importnt to know th mnu of ml prprd with lov.

vr. Unlss, lik I sid, th ml mttrs. Which it hrdly vr dos.

Your hro hs hd tough dy t work. Sh coms hom to showr nd hv glss of win bfor driving to th rndzvous point for hr blind dt tht vning, which sh'd bn unbl to stop thinking bout ll dy.

s writr, you now fc dcision: cut to th dt, or tk us hom with hr for th showr nd th win nd som lngthy pondring of hr lonly lif. Or bttr yt, cut stright to th dt nd covr ny prior ground (hr bd dy t work, th showr nd win) with short introductory sntnc.

Inxprincd writrs tnd to tk us hom with hr. Hv us tk showr with hr nd ooh nd hh bout how good th hot wtr fls. bout th tst of th win, hint of chrry, nic finish.

Th mor xprincd writr cuts stright to th dt.

This pitfll is similr to th chit-cht nd food nd trnsitionl rd flgs dscribd lswhr in this rticl. Th sm stndrd pplis: if it dosn't dlivr slint xpositionl informtion, if it dosn't mttr, if it just movs th chrctr forwrd in tim (s if th writr is obligd to show us ch nd vry momnt nd hour of th hro's dy, which isn't tru), thn skip it.

Know wht mttrs, wht counts, nd why. Thn, lik chss pic, mov th scns from on squr to th nxt. vry tim you hit th pus button to tk showr or rflct on th driv hom, you'r killing your story's pcing.

Mission-drivn scn writing is th Holy Gril of long form storytlling. It is th contxt for lmost vry problm nd solution you'll fc.

5. Invisibl Scn Trnsitions

Lss is mor. It rlly is. Unlss w'r tlking forply, but tht's nothr blog.

This principl lds us to th bst trnsitionl dvic known to th modrn storytllr. Th vry bst wy to gt from on scn to th nxt is… to do nothing.

Litrlly.

Two words: whit spc.

Just nd scn clnly, thn skip coupl of lins nd jump into th nxt scn. Which hppns whn ithr tim or plc or point of viw chngs.

Rd tht gin, too. It's bsic nd criticl.

If you'r jumping to nw chptr this tks cr of itslf. But chptrs r lgitimtly bl to hous n untold numbr of scns, nd if you wnt to mk sur th rdr is s wr of th trnsitions with thm s you r, skip lin or two whn tim or plc of POV chngs.
Othrwis, your trnsition might look lik this:

Th mting drggd on for svrl hours, complt with boring Powrpoint prsnttions nd th lngthy pontifictions of th CO, who hd nvr bn on sls cll in hr lif. Tomorrow would b no xcption.
Th sls cll bgn t noon, with rubbr chickn ctrd lunch lrdy on th tbl. Th clint poss rrivd togthr, s if thy'd mrshld in th prking lot to finliz strtgy nd snd off ny lst minut txts.

It's not wrong, pr s, it's just tht th trnsition from scn to scn (not, it's now tomorrow, diffrnt tim nd plc) is not s clr nd fficint s it could b. rdr who skims is likly to miss it.

Now look t it this wy. simpl thing, with n mpowring rsult:

Th mting wnt on for svrl hours, complt with boring Powrpoint prsnttions nd th lngthy pontifictions of th CO, who hd nvr bn on sls cll in hr lif. Tomorrow would b no xcption.

Th sls cll bgn t noon, with rubbr chickn ctrd lunch lrdy on th tbl. Th clint poss rrivd togthr, s if thy'd mrshld in th prking lot to finliz strtgy nd snd off ny lst minut txts.

Such simplicity. Th powr of th skippd lin of whit spc is mzing.

Ths mid-chptr scns – spcilly ncssry trnsitionl ons – cn b s short s you wnt. On prgrph xposition tht gts us from on point to th nxt r wondrful, spcilly if thy rplc two-pg spc fillrs tht sk to ccomplish th xct sm thing. Th nd to pd ths scns is th prdigm of th bginnr… which, ftr bing duly wrnd, you no longr r.

Such is th cs with ll fiv of ths rooki mistks. Your rdr for thm is th most importnt prt of your rviw nd dit procss.

nd if you cn't wrp your hd round it, I'm btting your significnt mnuscript-rdr othr cn. Bcus thy'r rdrs, nd rdrs r th victims whn ths things hit th pg.

On dy, you'r going to writ tht novl tht's bn tugging t your slv.
On dy, you'r going to strt posting rgulrly on your blog.
On dy, you'r going to finish tht book you strtd.
On dy…
Trust m, I know how you fl. For yrs, I wntd to b writr, but I didn't ctully writ. I hd lots of ids nd drms, but thy nvr md it out of my hd nd onto th pg.
Why? Bcus I ws witing for th prfct tim.
I thought tht I'd suddnly, mgiclly, find myslf inspird. Grt chunks of fr tim would mtrilis from nowhr, without ny ffort on my prt.
Guss wht? It nvr hppnd.
If you'r struggling to find th tim (nd nrgy) to sit down nd writ, thn tk hrt. You'r not lon – in fct, "finding tim to writ" is th most common issu tht I'm skd bout whn I'm coching writrs.
Hr's why thr'll nvr b prfct tim:
#1: Writing is High-Rsistnc ctivity

I'v bn writing for living for thr yrs (I'v compltd novl in tht tim too), nd I still find myslf rluctnt to gt going whn I sit down to writ.

Writing isn't sy. It tks mntl nrgy – nd oftn motionl nrgy, too. For most of us, th writing procss is lso thinking procss: for instnc, if you'r putting togthr "Hir M" pg for your blog, you'll hv to gt compltly clr bout wht xctly you offr, wht you chrg, nd so on.

Thr r n wful lot of ctivitis tht fl much sir thn writing. Doing th houswork. "Ntworking" on Twittr. Mking coff. Sur, you'll hv th occsionl dy whn you'r filld with inspirtion nd you cn't wit to gt to th kybord. But thos dys r prtty rr.

#2: Writing Rquirs Concntrtion nd Privcy

Finding th prfct tim to writ isn't th only issu t hnd. You might lso nd to find good plc. It's vry tough to writ if you'r sitting on sof with your lptop whil th tlvision's on nd housmts or fmily mmbrs r chtting.

I prsonlly find it lmost impossibl to writ t ll if nyon cn s my scrn (vn if thy'r not dlibrtly wtching) – nd I know tht lot of writrs fl th sm wy. To fl scur nough to writ, you nd crtin mount of privcy.

Th prfct plc isn't going to ppr from nowhr. You might hold out hops for mgicl dy whn your fmily do th chors, clr off to th prk nd lv you in pc to writ … but is tht rlly going to hppn?

#3: Writing Is Importnt but (Usully) Not Urgnt

Your writing is importnt – vn if no-on ls sms to think so. If you gt tht novl finishd, it could b th first stp on lucrtiv nw crr. If you writ rgulrly on your blog, you'll stblish strong onlin pltform. nd if you finish tht book, you'll hv somthing to sll to your blog's rdrs.

Byond tht, your writing is importnt bcus it's prt of who you r. I'd hzrd guss tht you'r hppy whn you mng to writ – nd disstisfid whn wks or months go by without ny writing. Th problm is, "writ novl" probbly isn't th most urgnt thing on your to-do list. Lss significnt but mor tim-prssing tsks – lik doing th chors, or fulfilling commitmnts tht you'v tkn on – r pushing writing down nd down th list.

So Wht Cn You Do?

Stop witing for th prfct tim.

Instd, mk commitmnt to find two hours during th nxt wk whn you cn writ. Thr r 168 hours in wk – you cn tk two of thos to do somthing tht rlly mttrs to you. Prhps thy won't b th prfct tim – but thy'll b fr bttr thn nothing.
Good luck with your writing!

Ovr th yrs I'v ncountrd mnuscripts in wid vrity of conditions. Whn mnuscript is in prtty rough shp, th writr bgins to los fith.

Th work sms to hv issus, nd on suspcts thy my b "structurl" (loosly mning tht thy hv to do with form rthr thn contnt). My own work hs crtinly flln pry to ths issus, nd frnkly, I'm not sur tht thy cn b voidd.

I hv compild list of six common structurl problms, in th hops tht by rcognizing n issu littl mor quickly, you'll b bl find rmdy with minimum of hrtbrk.

1. Wht you'r writing isn't wht you think you'r writing.

Not tht it's tht fr off, ncssrily. Lt's sy you'v st sil—to us n xtndd mrin mtphor—hding for n islnd. vryon nds som "s room," nd now you'v lndd somwhr on nighboring cost.

Writing is lrgly unconscious ctivity. t som point, w nd to bcom conscious nough to s how w might gt th rdr nd ourslvs sfly hom. Som writrs don't wnt to b md conscious t ny point during thir procss. In my xprinc, mor oftn thn not, thy drift.

This on isn't nything to worry bout, by th wy. Wht you'r writing is probbly bttr thn wht you think you'r writing.

2. You hv not gnrtd nough mtril to bgin rvising.

On of my clints ws dlightd with hr first ssignmnt, which ws to gnrt fifty pgs of crp. Hr nxt ssignmnt ws to gnrt nothr fifty, mking hundrd pgs of crp.

Thr is no substitut for not hving gnrtd nough mtril. It might b 70 pgs, but it is probbly 120 pgs tht is sufficint for you to uncovr wht your rl thm is, wht your mmorbl pssgs r, nd wht your rdrs cr bout—in othr words, wht's working.

Gnrting mtril cnnot b tught, but tht dosn't mn it is mystry: You gt n id nd you writ nd writ. Gnrting mtril cnnot b tught bcus it hs to b don instd.

3. You wnt to put too much stuff in.

chf whos cookbook I workd on clld it th "kitchn-sink" syndrom: whn bginning cook would mk mrinr suc by using vry vgtbl in th rfrigrtor, nd vry spic on th rck. Svntn ingrdints whn thr rlly should just b tomtos, grlic, nd lik four othr things. You wnt to b bl to tst th prmsn shvings.

Writrs think, How m I supposd to fill up whol book's worth of pgs unlss I includ vrything I cn think of? Unity—th sns tht your book is only bout on thing, nd tht th rdr cn trust you know how to driv this thing—cnnot b chivd by dumping in vrything you know bout vrything.

Instd of bing comprhnsiv, though, you cn b consistnt. nd if you limit nough things—lik th numbr of points-of-viw you us, or th numbr of sid plots you introduc, or th numbr of rich philosophicl thms you dbt—you will hv much bttr chnc of kping th rdr by your sid for th rid.

4. You lt too mny popl rd it bfor it ws rdy.

Why is this structurl problm? Bcus whn you involv "bt rdrs" (popl who rd your drft whn you know it isn't don), you r fr mor opn to fdbck thn you will b t ltr stg. You my los tim nd focus by pursuing dirction tht somon ls rcommndd rthr thn discovring th pth you rlly wnt to trvl.

Tht is why I lwys rcommnd bginning with profssionl dvlopmntl ditor, or trind, xprincd ys, such s othr writrs in workshop stting. ny rly rdr hs to hv th bility to suspnd his or hr go nough to dlivr n objctiv rspons to your writing.

On scond thought, objctivity my not rlly b possibl. But you do hv th right to sk for somon's non-ttchd, subjctiv rction. Tht will b vlubl nough.

5. Your nrrtor is too much lik you.

In fct, bsiclly, it is you. This is not problm in non-fiction, of cours, whn it is considrd grt to sound s much lik yourslf s possibl. Thn it is clld "finding your voic."

In fiction, howvr, you nd mximum flxibility to xplor motions nd imgin vnts tht will mbody thos motions. If your nrrtor is bound by only who you think you r, s opposd to who you might bcom, your writing cn go stl.

I compr it to th ctors Dustin Hoffmn nd Jck Nicholson. Nicholson sms to lwys b himslf in whtvr rol h plys, whil Hoffmn oftn sms to disppr bhind th rol h is in. If you writ lik Nicholson, you run out of mtril fstr.

6. You don't know if it's mmoir or not.

I hv spilld svrl thousnd words on this subjct, nd ntrtind host of objctions, so lt m s if I cn boil this on down. It is ithr mmoir, or it isn't. Thr's no in-btwn, no hybrid gnr tht vr mks it on to th shlvs.

If it is mmoir, you cn still us your rsnl of nrrtiv tchniqus. You cn hv flshbcks nd drmtic scns, you cn forg vrity of skillful links using qulity intrior dilogu, tc. But it ll hs to b th truth s you rmmbr it.

If it is not mmoir, thn you cnnot b constrind whn you go to tll your story. It is ll up for grbs: popl's nms, wht thy did, how you flt, whr it hppnd, nd wht it mnt. ll of it.

I could hv listd othr structurl problms, but tht's for nothr dy. I'll lv you with gm of dvic tht cm to m from n unlikly sourc. I ws hitchhiking in Iow onc, nd got pickd up by pig mdicin slsmn. H told m, "90% of popl gt lost bcus thy don't go fr nough." So kp going, kp writing, nd kp hving fun…nd don't b frid to throw opn th throttl nd go ll th wy.

Book middls cn b tricky—spcilly for thos of us who rn't fond of outlining. Thr you r, in th dd-cntr of your book, nd you fl lik you'r not rl sur wht dirction to tk nxt.

This is usully whn th ddly Shiny Nw Id syndrom (SNI) sts in. Your mnuscript dosn't fl vry xciting nymor, your chrctrs rn't quit s fscinting, nd you gt n mzing nw id…for totlly diffrnt projct.

But don't giv up on your mnuscript yt! It's importnt to show yourslf you cn finish projct, spcilly if you hvn't bn bl to complt on.

Hr r som ids for dling with your sggy middl:

Incrs th stks: This is my fvorit fix for sgginss. If you'r not fling xcitd bout your book nd your chrctrs r just milling round, your rdrs probbly won't b too intrstd in th plot, ithr. But if you cn up th nt, it rlly mks diffrnc. I lmost lwys hv scond murdr right in th middl of my book. Now my poor sluth hs coupl of murdrs to invstigt—nd if sh dosn't gt crcking, thr might vn b mor. You could incrs th stks in diffrnt wys, of cours. Bsiclly, whtvr your chrctr wnts most could b thrtnd or pushd vn frthr out of rch. Or mk thm frid of somthing nd prsnt thm with thir fr. Dpn th troubl thy'r in.

Rvl scrt or slip in n intrsting, prviously unknown chrctr tidbit: Scrts r lwys fun. Thy cn hlp provid littl bckstory for chrctr tht nds hr motivtion xplind. Thy cn kp rdrs gussing. Thy'r gossipy, surprising, nd just right for sggy middls.

Put your protgonist undr prssur or giv him stbck: This is similr to incrsing th stks, xcpt it dosn't hv to b tid into th min conflict. You could put prssur on chrctr by mking thm los thir job, hv n ldrly rltiv mov in with thm, or by th loss of frind.

Work bckwrds: If you know how you wnt your book to nd (but rn't sur xctly how to gt thr) you could writ your story bckwrds, working towrd th middl from th nd.

Introduc nw chrctr: This chrctr could b hlpful sidkick or could b somon who crts tnsion nd conflict for your protgonist.

Work on your subplot: I lov subplots. Thy hlp dvlop chrctrs nd crt n ltrnt storylin for th rdr to kp up with. Thy'r spcilly fun whn thy ti into th min plot in som wy. If you'r stlling out with your min story, work on your subplot for littl whil. Tht wy, you'r still moving your story forwrd, but you'r doing somthing nw nd frsh whil you rcovr from min plot burnout.

Contrdict truth: Is thr somthing you'v st up in your story to b n bsolut truth? Somthing your protgonist blivs is n stblishd fct? Contrdict it. I nrly lwys kill th most likly suspct for my mystry's first murdr.

Othr tctics:

Put th book wy for month. St ddlin for yourslf to rturn to it nd rwrd for yourslf to nsur tht you do. Rd th book up to th point whr you lft off. Cn you brinstorm 20 diffrnt dirctions for th story to go in? Cn you brinstorm 50? Th possibilitis cn b s zny nd improbbl s you wnt—th point is to gt your brin pointd in crtiv dirction with this prticulr story gin. Out of ll th ids you cm up with, which is mor concrt, mor vibl?

Writ th bck covr copy for your unfinishd book.

Giv outlining go. vn if you'r not n outlinr, this could work—try writing brif synopsis of wht you'v lrdy writtn…it might rmind you wht your focus or thm is. Or writ st of mini-outlins ch dy, just outlining th scn you wnt to writ for tht dy. Tht's lso vry ffctiv for squzing writing into busy dys. You'd just sktch out wht th chrctrs nd to do, whr th scn is st, nd wht th scn is going to ccomplish.

Got sggy middl? Wht fixs hv you found?

Bing nurotic, obsssiv crturs, w writrs tnd to dvlop ttchmnts to crtin tools of th trd. Ths dys, thos tools oftn tk th form of iWillWritYourNovl softwr progrms, tblt computrs tht cost two yrs' slry (s if you rcivd such thing) but llow you to work on your book in th bthtub, or whtvr invntion coms closst to providing n unintrruptd, socilly ccptbl cffin IV drip.

I won't dny tht I lov my lctronic toys nd my cffin, too. But my thr "must-hv" writing tools don't consum byt mong thm, cn ll b hd on th chp nd don't kp m wk whn I ought to b rchrging my writing brin. Th common fctor in ll of ths non-digitl tools is tht thy llow m to cptur bits of convrstion with chrctrs or snippts of scns whnvr nd whrvr thy occur to m, bfor my porous brin hs th chnc to lt my thoughts scp whil I srch for somthing on which to writ thm down. nd on of ths tools vn lts m work on my book in th bthtub.

My Fvorit Tool: Th Div Slt

My div slt, just bfor I trnscrib my nots.
Divrs tk nots undr wtr.

Think bout tht fct. You know wht tht mns, don't you? Divrs hv to hv somthing to writ on. ppr notbook won't gt th job don.

Solution: th div slt.

I kp n 8” x 10”, two-sidd div slt in my showr with spcil pncil ttchd, purchsd togthr for $10 t Scub.com. I’v drftd blog posts, ssy outlins nd scns for my novl on tht slt. So oftn, ids tht ludd m t th kybord suddnly burst into my mind onc I’v stppd into th showr to forgt bout th dy’s frustrtions. Th div slt nbls m to prsrv my thoughts bfor th procss of shmpooing, rinsing, towling off nd gtting drssd wshs thos piphnis wy. Whn th slt gts so crowdd with brly lgibl script I cn’t possibly fit nything ls on it, it’s tim to trnscrib my nots. I only kp bout thirty or forty prcnt of wht I’v jottd down, but tht filtring procss srvs n importnt function of its own. Onc I’v sortd through ll th nots, I wip th slt cln nd bgin gin.

Shh, go hd nd writ; vryon ls is slp.
Th Mrrig-Svr: Pn with Built-in Light

How mny of us kp notbooks on our nightstnds for thos middl-of-th-night inspirtions?

I thought so. Now how mny of us nnoy our prtnrs whn w turn on th light to jot down thos inspirtions?

Solution: th low-tch bllpoint pn with light in it. This tool focuss bm of light on th words you’r writing, nd tht’s it. You won’t wk up your prtnr or nyon ls. It’s usful t hom, nd–writing prnts spcilly will pprcit this–worth th wight of dozn binkis whn trvling nd stuck in hotl room with slping toddlr.

For som rson, ths pns r vry populr in th phrmcuticl industry, which mns if you hv frinds or fmily in th mdicl profssion nd you r nic to thm, you cn gnrlly kp yourslf wll supplid for fr so long s you don’t mind crrying round dvrtismnts for drugs to trt vrious vnrl disss nd th lik. I tnd to los ths things fstr thn I cquir thm, howvr, nd vntully I ws forcd to buy som t bout $5 pr pn. If you Googl “pn with light,” you’ll find svrl options.

No-nm contrption tht is not phon & dosn’t rquir pockt

My own contrption. I cn rcord my thoughts, nd no, it dosn't ccpt txts.
This tool is so bsic nd no-tch it's lmost ridiculous. For th, hm, oldr writrs rding this, think bck to collg whn you wor your dorm ky nd studnt ID on n ccordion kychin so tht you wouldn't hv to hold nything in your hnds, which, you know, ndd to rmin fr for cups of br–I mn books. (Myb collg studnts still do this? Or r thy using rtinl scns now?)
Lik mny writrs, I frquntly tk wlks bcus) I nd xrcis ftr sitting on my butt ll dy in front of th computr nd b) I'm hoping tht gtting wy from th computr nd into th world will offr som inspirtion nd frsh ids.

I could us my iPhon to rcord my thoughts, but hr's th problm: oftn, I don't wnt to bring my phon with m. I'm trying to block out th rings, buzzs, dings nd vibrtions; I don't in ny wy wnt to know tht nyon ls is trying to rch m. This is my tim lon with only my chrctrs for compny.

Solution: I bought chp ccordion kychin nd tiny 1 3/4" x 3" notbook on nothr kychin nd hookd thm togthr. I ttchd bllpoint pn with clip tht formd closd loop, nd I md copy of my hous ky nd slippd tht on, too. Now, whn I wlk, I slid th whol thing round my wrist, nd ll I nd to do to rcord thought is rmov th pn from th cp nd opn th minitur notbook.

On not of cution, howvr: norml popl–i.., non-writrs–sm to find it odd to com cross somon sitting by th sid of quit rod or prchd top gurd ril, writing. I cn't count how mny tims wll mning popl hv stoppd to sk m, "Hy, r you oky?" s I'v ttmptd to scribbl bit of dilogu. For som rson, rplying, "Oh, ys, I'm just writing," nvr sms to rssur thm. It just cuss thm to bck wy, slowly. But it's nic to know popl cr.

Don't gt m wrong. I'm not sying you cn't us on of ths opnings or tht thr rn't good books tht strt this wy.

I m sying tht you should think onc, twic, nd fiv thousnd tims bout using ths.

chrctr wking up: Sur, thr's probbly good rson th chrctr is gtting wokn up. Myb thir hous is on fir/thy'r lt for school/thy just rlizd thir insids r bing suckd out by s monstr. But not only is wking up ovrdon, wht xctly is gind by showing chrctr wk up? Why not just cut to th insids-gtting-suckd-out chs?

chrctr looking in mirror: I know wht you'r thinking. Nmly: "How in th hck m I going to show th rdr wht this chrctr looks lik whn it's 1st prson nrrtiv? Hmm... Mirror!" Don't do it. Thr is nothr wy.

xtndd dilogu with insufficint grounding: It's difficult for rdrs to s into nw world nd gt thir brings. It's vn mor difficult to fl groundd whn you'r wtching two chrctrs tlk nd you'r not xctly sur who thy r.

ction with insufficint grounding: You'v probbly hrd tht you nd to grb th rdr right off th bt. But it's rlly difficult to cr bout wht is hppning in n ction squnc bfor th rdr knows whr thy r nd who thy cr bout. vn if you do bgin with ction mk sur thr's nough stblishing dtil for th rdr to sort out wht's rlly hppning.

Chrctr dos X nd oh by th wy thy'r dd: By ll mns, tip off your rdr tht thy'r dling with n undd protgonist. But plying it for shock vlu probbly isn't going to work. Think bout it - by th tim th rdr picks up your book in th prnorml sction of th bookstor with titl clld BING DD SUCKS nd covr to mtch, r thy rlly going to b surprisd whn your protgonist dos somthing pithy nd thn you rvl thy'r dd?

Just Cll It Frking “Grn” lrdy

First I wnt to thnk Thrs nd Kthln, s wll s Holly Tuckr nd Bth Dunn from Writrs for th Rd Cross, who risd mor thn $30,000 for th Rd Cross with this mzing onlin vnt. Thir fforts rmind us how importnt it is to occsionlly shift our focus from th rlntlss pursuit of our own gols, nd look t th biggr world round us nd th opportunitis w hv to mk it bttr plc.

nw st of ruls

fw months go, I risd som ybrows hr t Writr Unboxd with commnt I md in rspons to on of nn lliott's blog posts, offring my unsolicitd nd not trribly srious Top Tn Ruls of Writing.

I'll b th first to dmit my ruls r sort of poor mn's vrsion of th pithy nd clvr tn ruls lmor Lonrd prscribd dcd go. Lonrd's ruls r clssic, nd worthy of furthr study nd xplortion. My own ruls, myb not so much. But I stnd stdfstly by my first on, th "rul" I hold most dr:

Nvr sy vrdnt.
Why th nti-vrdncy?

My problm with vrdnt is tht it's "writrly word." I mn, how oftn do you ctully hr sombody sy vrdnt in vrydy convrstion? No, th V-word is somthing popl us lmost xclusivly in writing – prticulrly whn it's supposd to b Srious Writing.

Unfortuntly it's common tndncy for spiring writrs to dvlop n lmost dsprt nd to b tkn sriously. So thy thumb furiously through thir thsuruss (or is it thsuri?), looking for words tht might mk thir writing sm Mor Srious. nd tht's whn bd things strt to hppn:

big nos bcoms "quilin."
prominnt chin bcoms "lntrn jw."
rlly good story bcoms "crcking good yrn."
nd your front lwn gos from simply bing grn to bing "vrdnt."
Gg m. Just cll it frking grn lrdy.

Som tough lov from word-lovr

This isn't bout som puritnicl qust to b "plinspokn." I bsolutly lov words, from plin to fncy; from "cow" to "cllipygin." Whn I rd John Fowls, I hv to kp dictionry nrby, but I lwys find th xprinc nriching, nd I'm floord by how incrdibly prcis his word choics r.

rlish th clvr wordply tht P.G. Wodhous, Dougls dms nd Trry Prtchtt indulg in with such ffortlss grc. nd I svor th rich us of lngug in th works of Willim Fulknr, Jon Clinch, nni Proulx, nd mny othrs whos ST vrbl scors no doubt clips my own.

My problm with vrdnt nd th othr words or phrss I'v singld out is tht thy usully don't ring tru whn I rd thm. Thy fl prtntious, s if thy'v bn insrtd by sombody who flt obligtd to find word lss pdstrin thn "grn." Wht I'm trying to xprss ws summd up fr bttr nd mor succinctly by lmor Lonrd:

"If it sounds lik writing, I rwrit it."

Sounding lik writing – tht's wht it coms down to. To m, mn in vrdnt cp with n quilin nos tlling crcking good yrn whil stroking his lntrn jw with his hnd… wll, it just sounds lik writing. So I'd rwrit it.

It's voic thing

So how do Fowls nd Fulknr nd Clinch (oh my!) gt wy with it? Simpl. Th words thy choos sty tru to th voic thy r using. vn s I scrmbl for my dictionry in th midst of dnsly wordd prgrph of Th Frnch Liutnnt's Womn, th spll John Fowls hs wovn rmins unbrokn, bcus thos mzing nd somtims unfmilir words flow so smoothly from his pn (or typwritr, or howvr th hll h wrot) tht thy don't pull m out of th story. Thos words clrly rflct th uthor's distinctiv vocbulry nd wy of thinking, so thy nvr bcom spd bumps for m whn rding thm. But hy, w'r ll diffrnt. lthough I cn't sy th word with stright fc, myb vrdnt rlly is prt of your voic. If so, gt down with your vrdnt slf, nd sprd th V-lov. But if vrdnt is not word you'd ctully sy to sombody whn dscribing hr lwn, hr pool tbl, or hr inxprinc, do m fvor. Just sy grn.

Th Vrdnt Conspircy: soon to b mjor novl from Dn Brown

I know I'm not ncssrily in th mjority with my stnd on th V-word. In fct, in th Bckspc forum, wondrful onlin writrs community whr I spnd ntirly too much tim, numrous uthors hv conspird to intntionlly insrt instncs of vrdnt into thir own novls - just to nnoy m. uthors who hv joind this vil Lgu of th Vhmntly Vrdnt includ Sr Grun, Jon Clinch, .S. King, Krn Dionn, M.J. Prson, Mggi Dn, Jnny Grdinr, lizbth Ltts, Hrry Hunsickr, nd probbly fw othrs I'v forgottn.

ll right, so thy'v got m outnumbrd. But I try not to lt it bug m. I just ssum thy r ll vr– I mn grn with nvy, jlous tht I hv found cus to bliv in. Mnwhil, thy rmin motionlly drift, with no litrry compss s powrful s my nti-vrdncy to guid thm – th poor bstrds. (Incidntlly, th fct tht th uthors nmd bov hv collctivly sold pproximtly 17 bzillion books should in no wy suggst thir opinions r mor vlid thn my own. I mn, who r you going to bliv: m, or som snooty bst-slling uthor?)

cll to rms: wht othr words shll w bnish?

Oky, I'v hrngud you long nough. So now I throw this out thr to th Grt Minds of th WU Rdrship: Wht r som othr "writrly words" tht cus your noss (quilin nd othrwis) to wrinkl with diststt? Pls submit thm blow, so tht w my ll strik thm from our thsuruss (or is it thsuri?) with grt vngnc! Thnks for rding, nd rmmbr: Only you cn prvnt vrdncy.

Th Problm of th urk Momnt

In short story I ws working on, Mrynn, socil climbr, is vctioning t n upscl rsort frm in Min. Sh nd hr fmily hv bn going to this frm th sm wk in ugust for th pst thr yrs. Vctioning with thm r Mrynn's husbnd's collg buddis. Thy r doctors nd lwyrs with dgrs from Hrvrd. Thy r clvr. Mrynn liks bing prt of this fncy group, but fls sh is coming to th pokr tbl short fw fc crds: sh hs only n ssocit's dgr from Wst Virgini businss collg nd no profssion t ll.

This prticulr summr, though, Mrynn hs somthing th othrs don't: Hr dughtr Kndll hs just bn dmittd to Princton. For Mrynn, Kndll's dmission to n Ivy Lgu School is vlidtion of hr

mothring skills s wll s kind of bckdoor dmission for hrslf. Mrynn is just trying to figur out how to lt this nws slip for mximum impct, whn sh witnsss Cynthi, on of thir dr frinds, humiliting Mrynn's tng son dm in front of crowd of popl.

Mrynn mngs to rtionliz Cynthi's bhvior. Sh tlls hrslf tht Cynthi ws out of sorts, thr ws nothing prsonl bout hr trtmnt of dm, th lss sid th bttr, nd on nd on. But whn sh rrivs t dinnr tht night sh finds tht no plc hs bn st for hr nd hr fmily t th long dinnr tbl which ll th frinds usully sit t togthr. This slight, too, sh mngs to justify.

But th nxt dy, Cynthi – tird of tolrting Mrynn's obtusnss – just lys it out stright: Sh tlls Mrynn tht sh nd th othrs don't wnt hr or hr fmily to b t th frm in th sm wk thy r. If Mrynn chooss to vction thr in th futur, sh should pick diffrnt tim to com.

How would Mrynn rct to this finl, unquivocl insult? On possibility ws to hv hr xprinc n piphny, rliztion bout hrslf nd hr fmily nd wht's rlly importnt in lif.

Don wll, thr's somthing stisfying bout n piphny. It hlps clos th story nd supplis kind of justic, if only mntl justic. In th ply " Chorus Lin", protgonist tlls th story of hr first clss t Nw York high school of th prforming rts. Sh tris vry hrd to prform th rols hr tchr ssigns hr but gin nd gin sh fils. Instd of hlping, th tchr ridiculs hr, finlly dvising hr to trnsfr to diffrnt school; sh'll nvr b n ctrss, h sys. Th protgonist is hrtbrokn. Sh gos to church nd gts down on hr kns, prying for guidnc. nd finlly, sh xprincs hr piphny: hr tchr is nothing, th clss is nothing. If sh wnts somthing sh should find bttr clss. Whn sh finds it, sh'll b n ctrss. Th udinc ts this up.

nd yt, whn I go to writ n piphny for my chrctr it oftn fls – icky. I trid to nlyz why.

First, it's sy to hv n piphny com off bdly. n piphny cn too sily b sn through s dvic th uthor uss to bring th story to clos. If you cn't mrry your hro off or gt hr shot, th nxt bst thing you cn do is hv hr xprinc urk momnt. n piphny cn fl lik dus x mchin: th firy

godmothr who not only gts Cindrll to th bll but lso ftrwrds rrngs to hv th princ signd, sld, nd dlivrd t hr door.

Scond, myb bcus thy r so convnint, piphnis r vry commonly usd in fiction. nd for tht rson, thy cn b boring.

Finlly, piphnis r not tru to lif. How oftn do popl ctully undrgo suddn lif-chnging rliztions? Most of th tim, w don't s things clrly t ll nd just hv to muddl through.

So, tmptd to hv your chrctr xprinc n piphny, wht should you do? Hr r som possibilitis:

1) Giv into th urg, but do it wll. Jms Joyc (s "Th Dublinrs") is mstr of th piphny.

2) If pproprit to th story, hv your chrctr xprinc n piphny tht poks fun t itslf. In th movi "Clulss," th protgonist's piphny is ccompnid by rinbows nd inspirtionl music in th bckground.

3) Giv your chrctr fls piphny – hv hr rliztion prov tht sh still dosn't gt wht's going on.

4) Dny your chrctr th piphny nd lt hr grop towrds som wy out of hr difficultis. In Mrynn's cs bov, tht would mn hving hr rspond to Cynthi's rudnss – by gring not to com bck or dfying hr or tking som third rod – without th bnfit of ny nlightnmnt from bov. How do you hndl tht urk momnt?

I'm mzd. Mny thnks to ll of you—with spcil nods to vrybody who hs tkn th tim to lv commnt. Lots of informtion nd food for thought thr. I think on of th rsons this blog is gtting populr is th qulity of th commnts.

To rcp wht I sid in tht post: KINDL NO BOOK BFOR ITS TIM! Don't throw your fldgling book out into th Kindlvrs without som srious thought.

I rliz you fl prssur to join th -book rvolution. Storis of Kindl millionirs r vrywhr. Th -book provids mgnificnt wy for stblishd writrs to montiz thir bcklist—or vn thir frontlist, if thy dcid to go indi ll th wy lik Brry islr. It's lso workd mgic for nw novlists lik Krn McQustion nd mnd Hocking, nd I'm rding mor succss storis vry dy. (Thr's on from uthor Mrk Willims t th bottom of th commnt thrd of th slf-pub post tht's must-rd.) I LOV storis lik this.

But it's importnt to kp in mind ths wr ll ssond writrs bfor thy slf-publishd. Thy hd invntory. Thy knw how to build pltform nd mk sls.

So don't xpct thir rsults until you'r ssond writr, too. vn if you don't gt poundd with bd rviws, you could b sbotging your futur crr. If rdr finds bd grmmr, misusd words, nd no plot—vn in 99-cnt -book—thy'r not going to wnt to rd tht uthor gin. Myb only hndful of popl will buy it, but if you bcom litrry drling som dy, tht bd book will lwys b lurking somwhr on sombody's Kindl, witing to dstroy your rputtion.

Writing hs lrning curv lik ny othr skill. You don't gt to ply Crngi Hll ftr fw pino lssons. You don't join th PG tour ftr coupl of ftrnoons on th golf cours. Lrning to writ tks tim. Wy mor tim thn you think.

It sur did for m. I cring whn I rd som of my rly work. I cn't tll you how grtful I m for th rjctions tht kpt th worst of it from sing print.
But t th tim, I thought tht stuff ws prfct. Jody Hdlund discussd this phnomnon in grt post lst wk. Sh pointd out: "Writrs r blind to thir own mistks."

ll bginnrs mk mistks. Flling down nd mking mss is prt of ny lrning procss. But you don't hv to disply th mss to th world.

Hr r som tll-tl signs tht writr is still in th lrning phs of his/hr crr.

1) Lots of writrly pros. Thos long, gorgous dscriptions tht got so much pris from your high school nglish tchr nd your collg girlfrind r hug turn-off for th pying customr who's srching for som kind of story in thr.

2) nglish-mjor showing off. It my fl incrdibly clvr to strt vry chptr with n pigrph from Finngn's Wk. But unlss it's rlly importnt to th plot, this will probbly nnoy rthr thn imprss rdrs. Ditto obliqu rfrncs to th Cvlir pots or nything by Thoms Mnn. Popl wnt to b ntrtind, not worship t your slf-rctd litrry ltr.

3) pisodic storytlling. I dmit my own guilt on this on. I could nvr nd my first novl, bcus it didn't ctully hv plot. It ws sris of rltd pisods—lik TV sris. (Mny thnks to formr gnt Colln Lindsy for rding th whol ms. nd tlling m this in kind wy. Bcus of hr thoughtful commnts, I could finlly drop th book nd mov on.) Critiqu groups oftn don't ctch this problm, if ch pisod hs drmtic rc of its own.

4) Hcknyd opnings. I wrot post on ths whil bck.Th worst is th "lrm clock" opning—your protgonist wking up—th fvorit cliché of ll bginning storytllrs. Thr's hilrious vido on this from th comdins t Script Cops Thy sy, "78 % of ll studnt films strt with n lrm clock going off."

5) Thinly disguisd oh-poor-m mmoirs nd rvng fntsis. Hving trribl childhood dos not mk grt story. Nithr dos surviving lif-thrtning diss. Tht kind of xprinc nds lot of procssing bfor it cn b workd into ntrtining fiction.
lso, rdrs probbly won't b nthrlld by 200,000 word dscription of guy just lik your toxic x, vn if h gts hckd up by his x-murdring scond wif in th finl scn. (Ys, I know tht ws fun to writ.)

6) Smi-fictionlizd rligious/politicl scrds. You hv to b rlly, rlly good (or yn Rnd) to gt wy with politicl fiction. Crl Hisn mngs to throw quit bit of his politics into his comic mystris, nd Chris Moor gts in som digs in his hilrious horror tls. But if you rn't s funny s thos guys, sv it for lttr to th ditor.

nd if you’v writtn novl just so you cn snd vrybody who isn’t xctly lik you to Hll, your rdr will wnt to snd you thr, too.

7) Dilogu info-dumps nd dsultory convrstion. nothr of my prsonl pitflls. ftr 25 yrs in th thtr, my brin’s nturl hbitt ws th script. It took m yrs to lrn chrctrs don’t hv to sy ll tht stuff out loud. nd “hllo how r you fin nd you nic wthr” dilogu my b rlistic, but it’s snoozifying. Rdrs don’t cr bout “uthnticity” if it dosn’t furthr th plot.

8) Tom Swiftis. Th writr who strins to void th word “sid” cn rpidly slip into bd pun trritory, s in th rchtypl xmpl: “‘W must hurry,’ xclimd Tom Swiftly.” Bd dilogu tgs my hv crpt into your consciousnss t n rly g from Nncy Drw nd Hrdy Boys books. Thy'r grt fun, but thy wr writtn by stbl of undrpid hcks nd lthough th storis r clssic, th pros is not.

9) Mry Sus. Mry Su is chrctr who’s stnd-in for th writr’s idlizd slf. Sh’s butiful. vrybody lovs hr. Sh lwys svs th dy. Sh hs no fults. xcpt sh’s boring nd compltly unblivbl.

10) Imprcis word usg. This is wht snggd th infmous unhppily-rviwd indi uthor of coupl of wks bck. If you don’t know th diffrnc btwn li nd ly, sthtic nd sctic, or why womn cn’t “crry hr stocky build” down th stirs, you’ll gt two-str rviws, too.

11) Incorrct splling nd grmmr. Th buying public isn’t your third grd tchr; thy won’t giv you gold str just to boost your slf-stm. Splling nd grmmr count. Words r your tools. Would you try out for profssionl bsbll if you didn’t know how to hold bt? lctronic grmmr chcks cn only do so much. nd thy’r oftn wrong. Buy grmmr book. Tk cours. Go to writrs confrnc. Sriously. vn good ditor cn’t do vrything.

12) Wordinss. Thr’s rson gnts r wry of long books. Nw writrs tnd to tk 100 words to sy wht ssond writrs cn sy in 10. If your pros is wighty with djctivs nd dvrbs, or cloggd with dtils nd rptitiv scns, you’ll scr off rdrs s wll.

If you’r still doing ny of ths things, RLX! njoy writing for its own sk whil longr. Rd mor books on crft.. Build invntory. You rlly do nd t lst two polishd mnuscripts in th hoppr bfor you lunch your crr.

nd hy, you don’t hv to bcom mrktr just yt. Isn’t tht good nws?

How bout you, scrivnrs? Wht mistks did you mk whn you wr strting out? s rdr, wht mturish rd flgs mk you wish you hdn’t wstd your 99 cnts?

How much stting should w dd to our storis? Is thr right or wrong nswr? Or is it mrly n individul dcision bsd on prsonl prfrncs?

Obviously, diffrnt gnrs crry diffrnt xpcttions. Historicls nd mor stting dtils in ordr to hlp th rdr “tim trvl” to th pst. Scinc fiction or fntsy my rquir mor lbort dscriptions so rdrs cn visuliz th nw worlds. Oftn xotic loctions nd mor flshing out.

Rlly, nytim w’r writing bout tims nd plcs tht r unfmilir to th mjority of our rdrs, w’ll likly nd to us mor stting in ordr to hlp our rdrs “s” whr thy r.

But vn within vrying gnrs, how cn uthors tll whn thy’r gtting th right mount of dtils? How much is too much, too littl? How do w know whn w’v got just nough?

Too Much? W tnd to includ too much whn w do n xtnsiv mount of rsrch on prticulr subjct nd think w nd to gt it ll in (ithr to mk ourslvs look smrt or bcus it fscints us). Th ovrlod will likly bor our rdrs or cus thm to skim through our dscriptions.

Too Littl? Plot-drivn writrs oftn us too fw dtils. W gt so busy tlling th story nd moving it long tht w forgt to hlp our rdrs xprinc whr thy r. Hving too littl stting my lso b th rsult of not doing nough spcific rsrch, thus cusing us to ovr-gnrliz on too mny dtils.

Just nough? If writr lns towrd using too much, thy my nd to sk thmslvs—why m I dding this? To show off how much I know? Or for th rdr nd th sk of th story? If writr lns towrd too littl dscription, thy my nd to sk—m I grounding th rdr nough? Wht ls cn I dd to brth lif into th stting?

It's tough to gt just nough. Th middl ground is going to vry dpnding upon our styls nd gnrs.
Howvr, wht r som stps ll of us cn tk to writ bttr sttings, no mttr our styl or gnr? mong th mny, mny things writr could dscrib, WHT should w focus on? Hr r 5 tchniqus I us in writing sttings:

1. Us stting dtils to st th mood.

Somtims it hlps to dcid th gnrl mood of th scn (lik fr, sdnss, joy, tc.) bfor writing it. Thn w cn pick fw stting dtils tht will hlp highlight tht prticulr fling.

For xmpl, rcntly I ws plnning scry scn in my currnt work-in-progrss (WIP). I brinstormd list of vrious stting dtils tht would nhnc th scr-fctor: th scurry of rt, th clttr of brnchs, th stnch of vomit, tc. Thn s I wrot th scn I rfrrd bck to my list nd trid to wv in som of thos dtils.

2. Mk sur to "s" th stting through th ys of th POV chrctr.

W HV to know our chrctrs insid nd out in ordr to ply thir rol uthnticlly (s ths posts for ids on flshing out chrctrs: How to void Crting Plstic Chrctrs & Crting Chrctrs Tht Mk Rdrs Cry).

Onc w'r in th point-of-viw (POV) of chrctr for prticulr scn, thn w cn only dscrib things tht prticulr chrctr would notic. My hro won't cr bout th styl nd txtur of my hroin's drss, but h would notic th spcific typ of rifl th ntgonist is holding.

3. ttmpt to us ll fiv snss throughout ch scn.

W hv n sir tim dding in visul dscriptions. But w cn't forgt to bring our scns liv through th us of txturs, sounds, smlls, nd tsts. Myb w cn't gt LL fiv snss onto vry pg. But s I writ ch scn, I mk conscious ffort to find plcs to includ s mny s possibl.

Thick, griny coff, th sizzl of frying pork, tngy tobcco smok, th chill of floor bords ginst br ft—ll of ths snsory dtils wovn in scn hlp th rdr to sit in th room right nxt to our chrctr.

4. Hon in on stting lmnts tht r criticl to th plot.

If possibl, try to dscrib things tht will somhow ply rol in th plot. For xmpl, in rcnt scn I dscribd plt of slightly burnt molsss cookis on th dining room tbl. In th nxt chptr, th hroin uss th cookis in dring plot mov.

Whn w'r judicious with wht w dscrib, it hlps build suspns. Unconsciously rdrs will bgin to xpct tht th lmnts w dscrib my com into ply ltr.

5. Sprinkl in simils nd mtphors.

I lov simils nd mtphors. Thy cn b butiful writing tchniqu whn don springly nd ppropritly. W cn wv in stting dtils through wll-plcd simil.

For xmpl, in rcnt scn I sy this: "Hr puls pttrd with th sm stccto s th icy-snow mixtur tht pltd th window." (Through th simil, I'm cluing th rdr into th wthr—which is n importnt fctor in th nxt scn.)

Prologus – this sid of hll

I undrstnd why rdrs ht prologus nd skip thm. Sinc Dcmbr is my Mdcp Rding Month, I'm shuffling through rqustd prtils nd fulls until my ys r bloodshot nd I'm bgging to minlin

good gin. So fr, w hv on contrct offr – not bd to my wy of thinking. But th rst? Wll, thy hv this littl problm…

Prologus.

Thy cn b lovly thing or th blight upon ll who rd. This btch pprs s though mny uthors drnk from th sm wtring hol nd collctivly dcidd thir storis ndd prologus. I'v nvr sn so mny of th littl blightrs, nd it's worrisom bcus not singl on of thm blongs thr.

Not. On.

My littl rd pn hs slshd through virtully vry singl on with ths words: WHT'S TH POINT?

nd tht is xctly th point. You don't writ prologu bcus it fls good or your lbow itchs. You writ on bcus it blongs thr. Prologus hv to dhr to th sm ruls of good writing nd story orgniztion tht your ntir mnuscript dos – mning tht thr is rson for its xistnc.

Prologus, prty of on

ll too oftn prologus bhv lik th uthor's privt plyground, nd sh is th only on who undrstnds how to gt on th monky brs nd vryon ls is stnding round, scrtching thir hds wondring how sh did tht.

Wht do I mn by this? Lt's sy your story tks plc in Nw York nd cntrs on Chrctr Jn finding job in tttoo prlour, but your prologu is bout Chrctr Jn s mr infnt nd hr fvorit nnny usd to rd Plygirl. Holy Hlvtic, Btmn, wht dos this hv to do with th min story? Wht on rth ws sh thinking?
Now if I sk th uthor, sh cn ctully tll m. But hr rl problm is tht sh's too clos to hr story nd cn't s how unncssry it is. Sh undrstnds hr Chrctr Jn's bckstory nd fls complld to includ it bcus sh blivs this informtion is intgrl to undrstnding th chrctr. But wht bout th rdr? Do thy fl tht sm nd to rd it? No.

nd tht's why rdrs skip prologus.

Clling Mr. Info Dump

I rmmbr this guy in high school who t whtvr ws lft sitting on th lunch tbls. Ndlss to sy, h didn't xhibit svlt silhoutt. H ws th school vcuum clnr. nd tht's nothr problm with prologus. Thy'r oftn book's vcuum clnr. Don't know whr to put ll this rrnt informtion? Hy, no problmo…lt Mr. Prologu t it.

So bfor Jn or Jo Rdr cn gt into th mt of your story, you toss ll th lftovr food tht you couldn't t nd stick it in th most vulnrbl plc in your book – th BGINNING. So Jo nd Jn rdr r filld up to thir bck tth with so much grbg tht thy nd to purg. nd thy do this by putting YOUR BOOK bck on th shlf.

nd tht's why rdrs skip prologus.

Prologu info dumps r clssic mong nw writrs bcus thy usully hvn't dvlopd th rt of intrtwining informtion with th nrrtiv. It tks prctic nd xprinc to smlssly introduc informtion nd kp th ction going. nd whn you'r trying to show tht you'r n xprincd writr, this prticulr foibl will xpos you fstr thn th bgl cn fll slp.

So…?

So wht do you do? Wll, th sf bt is to simply not us prologu. Just lik surgry, sclpl is dngrous thing in th hnds of nophyt. B sf nd void thm until you'r furthr long in your writing crr. Will prologu rsult in instnt dth rjction? No, but I'll sur b scrtching my hd, ND I'll b looking t your pgs with much toughr y.

If your writing sings, thn I will suggst tht you ditch th prologu nd sprinkl th informtion throughout your book. Or myb you'll rd this nd do it yourslf.

Ncssry

Thr r tims whn you nd prologu. My novl, Donovn's Prdigm hs prologu. I wrot on bcus I ndd to xplin why on of my MCs rcts th wy h dos whn confrontd with crtin sitution tht is pivotl to th plot. It's informtion th rdr must hv so tht th story mks sns. If I hd sprinkld tht scn into th min story, it would hv com out s bckstory, which would hv killd th motionl impct. In word, I consciously wrot th prologu bcus it hd to b thr.

Brvity

Chptr lngth prologus is somthing I'm sing firly rgulrly. Prologus wr nvr mnt to b tht long. Dictionry.com dfins Prologus s, " prliminry discours; prfc or introductory prt of discours, pom, or novl."

Thy'r littl prcursors to th min story, with hvy mphsis on littl.

xpcttions…Sy, huh?

void mking n ditor rch for bottl of tquil by lwys bing clr bout wht your prologu is sying. I'v rd mny prologus tht forcd m to r-rd thm bcus I ws convincd I'd missd somthing. If I cn't figur it out, thn I know th rdr won't ithr. Th rson thy wrn't clr is bcus it hd zip ll to do with th uthor's pitch. If your book is bout vmpir clning womn, thn prologu with wr-bgls mks littl sns. It's "sy, huh?" momnt. Thr nds to b ti-in to th story tht th rdr cn follow.

Prting Gift

s I sid t th bginning, I rlly do lik prologus bcus thy cn b dlicious in th hnds of giftd writr. Bfor you succumb to th urg to writ prologu, sk yourslf th following qustions:

Wht is th point?

Is this informtion vitl to th rdr in ordr to undrstnd th book?
Is this th only plc whr I cn imprt tht informtion?
Is it short – two or thr pgs?
If you go into writing prologu with clr intnt, thn you cn void rsting on this sid of hll. To do othrwis is to invit rd pointy pitchforks nd trnl flm…nd bd mrgrits.

Why lss dtil mks mor blivbl chrctrs

Chrctr sktch by 1horstown

Th qustion cm up on th NNoWriMo Forums s to whthr to includ littl or lot of chrctr dscription. I think lss is mor, nd I'll tll you why. It's ll bout blivbility.

W'v ll sn books whr chrctrs r introducd with lngthy, dry pssg of dscription tht sounds mor lik polic blottr rport thn nything ls:

Jkob wlkd into th room. 6'2", burly build, wring pin-stripd rmni tilord to prfction. His shos wr blck ptnt lthr, with flwlss whit spts. His hir ws clos-croppd buzz cut, grying, but still choing his bckground s Nvy Sl. Th scr running from th cornr of his lft y, downwrd, thn bck to th cornr of his jw only r-nforcd th img. H stuck on of his hug hnds into n innr pockt of his suit, nd withdrw mirror-finish gold cigrtt cs. I ws prtty sur h could crush coconut in thos gint mitts if h wntd to. H lit smok nd skd, in his low smoky voic, "So. Did you bring th mony?"

Boring, isn't it? nd tht's th bst I cn mk it. Dtil, dtil, dtil, hmmring on your brin. Rmmbr this! Rmmbr tht! Isn't it vivid now? S s s!

Th problm with this is not tht ny of th prticulr dtils r bd. In nd of thmslvs, thy'r fin, colorful dtils. Nor is th problm tht th dtils don't contribut to portryl. Thy do.

Th problm coms in th ttmpt to pint fully unmbiguous pictur of th prson, on tht lvs no flxibility whtsovr in th rdr's mind s to how you nvisiond th chrctr.

Strotyps r good

Whn introducing chrctr, you'r usully bttr off sticking with brod stroks. Th importnt thing t tht point is not wht color hir somon hs or how tll thy r, but rthr, wht kind of prson thy r. Th importnt thing is to giv th rdr frmwork for undrstnding tht prson nd how thy might ct.

For tht, nothing bts strotyp.

I my gt som flk for sying tht, but tht dosn't mk it untru. Sur, in rl lif w striv not to strotyp popl, bcus rl popl r infinitly vrid. Whn w gt to know ny rl prson, w lwys find tht thr is mor to thm thn just strotyp.

But you'r not writing rl lif. You'r writing novl. nd for tht, giving th rdr simpl strotyp is grt strtgy. In just fw words, you cn stblish probbly 80% of wht th rdr nds to know. In th procss, you st frmwork you cn ltr build on. Kp it short:

Jkob wlkd into th room. Tll. Big. I'v known nough lik him to spot th typ. Militry, probbly x-Nvy Sl if I hd to guss. Somthing bout th wy h crrid himslf. "So," h brkd t m, "did you bring th mony?"

Th strotyp is just strting point

Just bcus you strt with strotyp dosn't mn you'r stuck thr. You'r fr—nd ncourgd!—to build on th strotyp with dditionl tlling dtils. Th rmni suit, for xmpl, sys somthing bout how wll th guy hs don sinc lving th militry.

You cn vn dd vn dtils which contrdict th strotyp. But if you'v got ny of tht going on, you'r strongly dvisd to introduc thos dtils rly. Do it bfor th rdr bcoms convincd by dfult

tht th opposit is tru. For xmpl, if Jcob ws woundd in ction nd wlks with cn nd svr limp, you'd bttr tll us tht up front:

Jkob wlkd into th room, slowly nd lning hvily on cn. Tll. Big. I'v known nough lik him to spot th typ. Militry, probbly x-Nvy Sl if I hd to guss. Somthing bout th wy h crrid himslf crrid through, in spit of his limp. "So," h brkd t m, "did you bring th mony?"

Unlss—s with ny such ruls of writing—it works not to. You might kp contrdictory dtil scrt if you'r going to spring big twist with it ltr. Lik, myb instd of bing woundd, Jkob ws dishonorbly dischrgd nd tht's somthing you'r going to us to crt plot twist ltr.

ithr wy, st th strotyp quickly, s brifly s you cn. Us th bsolut minimum of dtils ncssry for th scn to crry th motionl wight it nds to, nd to void "hy, you didn't tll m h hs limp" typ plot hols.

Wit, you sid it ws ll bout blivbility

I did, nd tht's tru. Bcus th rson w dscrib chrctrs t ll is to mk rdrs fl nd bliv crtin things bout thm. Jkob, s portryd hr, is clrly intndd to b n intimidting, formidbl chrctr. Tht's rlly ll w nd rdrs to know, so thy cn b worrid on th protgonist's bhlf. Tht's it. vrything ls is suprfluous, nd hrmful to blivbility.

Strotyps work prcisly bcus thy lv mor to rdrs' imgintions. If w giv rdr "looks lik n x-Nvy Sl" strotyp, thy'll gt whtvr mntl img thy gt, bsd on ll th popl thy'v vr known, mt, nd sn in thir livs. Whtvr ny prticulr rdr imgins for himslf or hrslf, will by dfinition b th most blivbl rprsnttion for tht rdr. strotyp, ys, but strotyp bsd on rl pttrns of rl popl. Diffrnt from yours, myb, but 100% blivbl to th rdr.

Lss is mor in chrctr dscriptions: us strotyps to crt blivbility; dtils to crt dimnsionlity.

Us th strotyp to your dvntg

strotyp brings to wlth of dtils to th rdr's mind for fr, t bsolutly zro dditionl word count. Thos dtils xist, nd whr thy r prdictbl you cn us thm to your bnfit.
Lt's tk y color s n xmpl. In th NNoWriMo novl I'm writing this month, I hv young womn of Cubn/Hispnic dscnt. Th rdr got tht strotyp in th first scn whn w mt hr. Much ltr, in th first-kiss scn btwn hr nd my MC, th strotyp supplid dtil I could work with to flsh out th momnt btwn th chrctrs. Hr, thy'r sitting on couch, lning vr closr to ch othr:

Sh's looking right in my ys, nd w'r so clos I cn s hr ys rn't pur blck. Thr's tiny littl drk brown flcks in thm.

This works bcus I cn prdict with lmost 100% crtinty tht ny rndom rdr's "mid-20s, Cubn/Hispnic womn" strotyp is going to hv drk ys. So whn I rfr to hr ys s bing drk—somthing tht ws nvr mntiond xplicitly in hr originl dscription—I rwrd rdrs by r-nforcing th dtil thy imgind for thmslvs. It's subtl wy of tlling thm "ys, you hv nvisiond this chrctr th right wy," nd bm! th rdr's blif in th chrctr is cmntd forvr.

ll I hv to do is not contrdict th strotyp too much. I build on th strotyp, rthr thn contrvning it rdiclly. If, in tht scn, I hd suddnly sid sh hd pircing blu ys or somthing, tht would mk rdrs ht m for bing totl idiot. nd thy'd b right to do so; th dtil just wouldn't fit.

Strotyps crt blif; dtils crt dimnsion

You gt rdr's dp buy-in, thir suspnsion of disblif, from tpping into th rdr's mntl strotyps nd forcing thm to imgin th dtils. nd you do tht by giving only th minimum of dtil ncssry to guid th rdr to th corrct, story-rlvnt, strotyp.

You gt dimnsionlity, diffrntition from th strotyp, by crfully lyring smll dditionl dtils on top of th strotyp, lik putting brown flcks in womn's blck ys.

Lss is Mor

Lss is mor bcus whn you toss in too much dtil, you'r tlling your rdrs how to nvision th chrctr, rthr thn showing your rdrs how to nvision th chrctr for thmslvs. Tht's gurntd losing gm, bcus you'll nvr—nd I do mn nvr—b bl to tll thm nything tht's s convincing nd blivbl s wht you cn ld thm to invnt on thir own.

ll th strotyp dos is lt you control, limit, nd prdict wht thy'r going to invnt, so you cn kp thir imgintion in lin with your story.

How to S.W.O.T. Your Story Ovr th Fnc

Thos mong us who hv spnt ny tim in cubicl in Groundhog's Dy-lik corport xistnc know wht this mns.

t lst th first prt, th S.W.O.T. prt. On hs to b vn just littl cquintd with th gm of bsbll to wrp your hd round th lttr colloquil nlogy.

ssuming th scond but not tking th first for grntd, llow m to dfin wht this mns.

S.W.O.T. is n cronym for procss of looking t projct from ll ngls to mk sur it'll work th bst tht it cn possibly work. Which is good id whn significnt invstmnt is t stk.

It's littl lik story plnning, but mor long th lins of story vluting.

Which oftn lds to furthr story plnning. spcilly whn it works.

S.W.O.T mns: Strngths… Wknsss… Opportunitis… Thrts.

ll four of which r vibl nd powrful fcts of your story tht you cnnot tk for grntd. Thy'r sy to ovrlook s critri s you work, bcus by dfinition you r mking th right choics in ch ctgory s you go long.

But, s you go long, you probbly rn't sing it th wy othrs will. Or s you will whn you'r don.

Tking on or mor of thm for grntd – which th ovrwhlming mjority of writrs do whn it coms to thir own storis – is prcisly th grt risk in ny crtiv ntrpris.

Why? Bcus somthing bout your story mks you lov it. Or t lst md you lov it t som point. It's sort of lik flling in lov. Somthing bout th othr prson mks tht hppn. Cuss somthing dp within you to swll up nd dnc nd scrt hormons nd snd mbrrssing txts.

Thn, ltr in tht prticulr lov story, rlity sts in. Tht crtin somthing my or my not b nough to sv th dy nd infus th rltionship with futur.

Your story is no diffrnt.

You lov it. But will somon ls lov it? Will you lov it whn it's don?

Conduct your own privt S.W.O.T. vlution nd find out.

You just might stumbl on somthing tht will mk it vn bttr.

Strngths

vr bn to nighborhood in which ll th houss look th sm? Th only diffrnc bing th lndscping nd th color of th trim?

Whtvr th diffrncs r – th rltiv strngths, thy r subtl. Loction. Th dirction thy fc. Proximity to busy strt or th prk. Somthing bout th nighbors, who look diffrnt thn you do. Tht tr in th front yrd.

If you lookd t ny on of thos houss, would smnss b strngth or wknss? Could go ithr wy, spcilly if pric is ky fctor in wht you buy. Chncs r, looking xctly lik th Jonss nxt door isn't wht compls you to offr up som rnst mony. But chncs r just s good tht you'll find somthing bout th hous tht mks it stnd out in your mind.

Wht will stnd out in n gnt's or ditor's mind whn thy rd your story?

Is your cor id frsh nd originl, or just nw spin on provn gnr?
r you simply imitting th run of th mill grocry story pprbck in your nich, trying to b th nxt Sndr Brown by writing lik Sndr Brown?

Is your hro cut from th cloth of somon lrdy plyd by Lonrdo Dicprio, or will this b somon tht n gnt or ditor hsn't mt bfor?

If you'r thinking tht it's th strngth of your writing, your loqunt, potic pros, or prhps your dgy tk on noir… it's rlity chck tim. Bcus hr's th hrd truth: if you'r unpublishd, gnts nd ditors r ll bout story.

It's story, story nd mor story. How wll you writ is just th nt in. nd byond crtin ntry-lvl dgr of profssionlism… ll tht mttrs is story, story, story.

n unpublishd Hmingwy with crppy story will gt rjctd s quickly s you will. In fct, som collg lit clsss hv provn just tht.

So… wht bout your story is strong nough to turn th hd of tird, cynicl, mglomnicl, ovr-workd nd thrfor grouchy gnt or ditor?

If you drw blnk, s th "O." in S.W.O.T. It my b tim to r-think som things.

Wknsss

Somtims th srch for strngth will turn up vidnc of wknss. Th gol isn't lwys turn wknss into strngth, but rthr, to fix wht's brokn so tht it dosn't nd up bing distrction.

Th plyr who drops th bll with two outs dosn't hv to b th plyr who hits homrun ltr in th gm. Just holding down your nd of things cn b nough to kp you in th gm.

Thr r six cor comptncis for succssfully-told story: concpt, chrctr, thm, structur, scn xcution nd your writing voic. Thr r multipl critri for ch.
If you r wk in ny singl on of th six cor comptncis, it'll kill your submission to n gnt or publishr. Just on.

Thy'll nvr dmit, but with so mny comptnt storis flooding thir in-box, thy'r looking for two things: th nxt Big Thing (thy rn't intnding to tk on nothr lso-rn in crowdd commodity nich), nd… rson to rjct you.

It's lik dting. You rn't hoping th girl blchs ftr slmming hr third shot of Jgr (this bfor you tk hr hom to mt your prnts) or tlks incssntly bout th sxul prowss of hr lst boyfrind, in fct you'r not looking for stuff lik tht t ll.

But you do hv your ntnn out.

Th momnt you hr it or s it, sh's history. No mttr wht ls is working.

gnts nd ditors r lik tht, too.

Opportunitis

llow m to stt th obvious: if you hv no rl strngths, try to think of somthing tht will mk your story strongr.

If you hv wknss, fix it.

But byond tht, othr opportunitis bound.

Look two yrs down th rod, whn th book or film you r writing will b coming out. r you writing bout somthing tht will s timly thn s it is now? Is thr n opportunity to siz tht othr writrs rn't noticing in trms of th world, spcific rn, or socil trnd?

Hv you tkn th opportunity to b frsh nd originl, yt still within th box of nticiptd nrrtiv principls nd form?

nd spking of rns… dos your story hv on? Is your hro doing somthing cool in hr dy job? r you dlivring vicrious thrill rid to th rdr, pk into forbiddn plc, guilty plsur?

Ths r ll opportunitis. Somtims you don't hv to ovrhul your story to siz thm.

nd somtims it's worth it.

Thrts

You think you r lon in tht room s you ttck th kybord. You think you hv lft this world bhind s you disppr into your story.

Think gin. Thrts from this world r ll round you, witing to swllow your mnuscript nd your writing drm in on quick, insnsitiv gulp.

Is thr mjor bstsllr or hit film out thr on th sm topic s yours? If so, you'r tost. You my think you'r working in hot fild, but trust m, so do th othr 125,000 writrs bout to submit story on th sm thing.

Is your novl too short? Too long? Both r thrt to your succss.

I rcntly spnt som tim with scinc fiction writr t confrnc who hd bsolutly no id tht his 175,000 word mnuscript ws too long. Whn I told him it ws, h lookd t m lik I'd just sid his wif ws too ugly (n nlogy, folks, I nvr sw th guy's wif, I'm sur sh's knock out). Thn on of th gnts in ttndnc t this confrnc wlkd by, so w skd him.

I lov it whn tht hppns.
Tht gnt wsn't quit s kid glovs s I ws. H sid tht not only ws th story too long, but tht nobody would vn rd th thing whn thy sw th pg count.

Writing sris? Tht's thrt. You nd to writ nd sll th first book in wht you vry quitly intnd to bcom sris, without hving to dd tht "it's sris" to justify hnging, lss thn stisfying nding. Publishrs rrly buy sris from nw uthor, but thy my buy singl story if it's good nough (vn if two book contrct is offrd, which it oftn is… tht dosn't imply thy wnt th squl; th succss of th first book totlly dtrmins if squl will b publishd, or not).

Your wknsss r ll thrts. Scrw up on of th six cor comptncis – just on – nd you'r doomd. vn if th othr fiv r stllr.

But wit… you lrdy writ bttr thn lot of th so-clld -list uthors, right? Of cours you do. But tht won't gt you publishd.

Why? Bcus writrs undr contrct gt ditd. Thy gt scond chnc. nd third. nd stnd-in ghost writr if th originl uthor cn't gt it don.

Nw submissions… not so much. Thy just gt rjctd.

Th biggst thrt of ll? Sttling.

Right bhind not undrstnding whr th br is in gnrl (on word: high), nd wht th critri r for ch of th six cor comptncis.

So giv it good S.W.OT.

Stp outsid yourslf nd crwl into th skin of your worst nightmr of n gnt or ditor. Or bttr yt, book or film rviwr. Somon who hs sn it ll, htd it ll nd is rdy for vction.

Objctivity, honsty, vulnrbility nd th willingnss to do mor work r ky to mking your projct bttr.

nd it cn lwys b bttr. No mttr how much you tll yourslf tht it's don.

If you'r nything lik m, somtims writing first drft cn b hug struggl. On som lvl w my b busy "just writing," but on nothr lvl, w'r oftn working hrd to ignor, silnc or simply drown out our mind's chttr.

No wondr w somtims rsist writing nd finishing our first drfts! It's not lwys sy to split our ttntion btwn writing nd "mind-mngmnt." To writ usful, "flvorful" first drft, it hlps to hv hlpful mindst nd fw tools to hlp us focus.

Mind Mngmnt 101: ccpt th Chttr

lthough th flow stt fls mzing whn it hppns, it's stt tht blsss us mostly whn w'r not xplicitly trying. "Flow" won't hppn vry tim w writ.

To writ flvorful first drft, it's importnt tht w undrstnd nd ccpt simpl fct: w'r humn, nd somtims w'r going to bring n unruly or uncooprtiv mind to th tbl whn w writ.

Writrs I coch somtims worry thy my b "forvr blockd" whn thy'v hd difficult writing sssion. Thy my fl tht until thy lrn to mng or "compltly ovrcom" thir ngtiv mntl chttr, thy'r not writing wll. Pls void mking ths common mistks.

Rmmbr tht vry writr xprincs blocks.

Rmmbr tht th qulity of on writing sssion dosn't dfin lif's work of writing.

W diffus our focus nd us up vlubl writing nrgy whn w try to "rson with" or ovrcom distrcting thoughts. Th solution to crting fntstic first drfts is much simplr. First, ccpt tht "mntl chttr hppns." Thn, rdirct your mntl chttr s you writ.

Mind Mngmnt 102: Rdirct

vr notic tht whn you'r just bout to gt shot, th nurs suddnly sks bout your job, your fmily or your summr plns? Whn w'r fcd with tsk w rsist (gtting shot, writing first drft), it's much sir to rlx whn w'r focusd on somthing ls.

Litrry forms nd writing xrciss jump-strt our writing bcus thy provid us with hlpful limits. ("Hv I md th links xplicit btwn 'cus' nd 'ffct?'" "Hmmm. Hv I dscribd svn diffrnt colors without nming thm?") Rstrictions nd guidlins occupy our minds so w cn focus mor frly on writing.

Introducing th "Swiss Chs Drft"

I confss: Swiss chs intrigus m. It's substntiv, it's flvorful nd it's got som dgr of structurl intgrity. Swiss chs dosn't fll prt, dspit its mny hols!

Try th following xrcis with sns of opnnss nd dvntur. W'r going to build your "Swiss chs drft" by shifting your focus from crting "solid" first ffort to crting "flvorful" slic of writing, on tht holds togthr, dspit its mny gps.

Hr's how:

Stp #1 - Limit Your Focus

Dcid Wht th "Chs" Is.

Bfor you bgin to writ, choos on lmnt ("contnt" or "form") to dfin your Swiss chs drft's structur. In othr words, nswr th qustion, "wht's th 'chs?'"

For xmpl, if you nd to loosn up nd hv fun, you might tk risks by chllnging yourslf to s how bdly (vry bdly) you cn writ. This is n xmpl of focus on contnt.

You might wnt to xplor nw chrctr's motivtions or prsonlity in-dpth. If so, you might chllng yourslf to situt your chrctr in spcific stting nd s how motionlly rsonnt you cn dpict th chrctr's thoughts nd ctions. This is nothr xmpl of contnt focus.

If you'r drfting prsusiv ssy, you my wnt to sktch out th bsic structur of your rgumnt, using plcholdrs for spcific fcts, ncdots or contxt to support your points. This mphsis on drfting th pic's structur is n xmpl of focus on form.

Onc you'r dfind your "chs," writ on-sntnc sttmnt of "wht I'm going for in this drft" nd put it t th top of your scrn or pg. (Tip: you my choos to mphsiz th word "drft" s rmindr.)

Stp #2 – Limit Your Tim.

Dcid to spnd spcific nd limitd mount of tim writing your Swiss chs drft. For xmpl, “I’ll drft my nw rticl for th nxt two hours, until 12 noon…no mor, no lss.”

Your tim frm dosn’t hv to b limitd to on dy. If you’r working on book chptr or long ssy, you my nd svrl work sssions. Just b sur to dcid on tim limit, nd whn you’r finishd writ it t th top of your pg or scrn.

Now you’r rdy to writ. To kp you focusd, you my wnt to st timr s you bgin.

(Tip: To sty focusd on your projct, snd frind “booknding” mil, Twt or txt mssg. Tll thm you’r strting your drft, nd dscrib your tim limit. Lt thm know how long it’ll b bfor you rport bck to thm with quick progrss rport. Booknding is mzingly ffctiv!)

Stp #3 – Mrk th Hols s You Go.

You don’t nd to hv ll your ids dvlopd or rsrch compltd to finish usful first drft.

s you writ, us plcholdrs such s “X”, “[RWORK],” [??]” or “_____” to hold spc for things to dd ltr. (You my do this lrdy.)

Using plcholdrs cknowldgs gps you’ll rturn to in ltr rvisions, fring you up to focus on your writing.

Stp #4 – Notic nd Rdirct.

(Kp Mking “Chs”!)

s you’r writing, your mind my still spk up nd try to distrct you from writing. If this hppns, hr’s your chnc to grt it wisly.

“Hllo, mntl chttr…I’v bn xpcting you! Hv st right ovr hr, nd hy – would you wtch th clock for m?

“Oh, go chck somthing for m. Cn you rmind m, ‘wht’s th chs?’ Oh yh, tht’s right. Thnks!

“Sit tight, now…I’ll b with you shortly.”

Stp # 5 – Cur th Drft Bfor You Rvis

ccording to this Swiss chs rcip, nwly formd chs must cur for four months to yr bfor it’s rdy to b tn. Your finishd Swiss chs drft my b curd nd rdy to rvis s rly s two dys ftr crtion.

It my nd longr to sttl. Lt your sthtic pltt guid you, nd whn it's tim to smpl your drft, njoy your flvorful first ffort.

—-

I hop you'll hv fun with ths ids.

How do you mng your mind whn you writ?

How'd your first "Swiss chs drft" turn out? I hop you'll drop us lin in th commnts nd giv us your ids.

I hv just submittd th first fw chptrs of my thrillr novl, Pntcost to my writing group for critiqu. Th rsponss hv bn grt on plot but truly, my dilogu sucks! (nd I m using th nglish splling bfor vryon strts snding m typo notics)

So hr r som rticls nd links tht I hv bn rding to try nd improv my dilogu so hopfully thy will hlp you too.

"Dilogu is not convrstion" from Robrt McK 'Story'. Convrstion is boring, rptitiv nd concrns inn things. Dilogu movs th plot long, rvls chrctr nd vry word is ncssry to dvnc th story. s lfrd Hitchcock sid, ' good story is lif with th boring bits tkn out'.

Vry fw writrs gt wy with writing in dilcts, (think Irvin Wlsh) but for most rdrs it is vry nnoying nd disturbs th flow of rding so don't do it.

Dilogu brks up monotony of prgrphs of xposition/dscription nd mks th story mov fstr (J Konrth). It is bttr to rvl story lmnts in dilogu thn xposition. It should b nturl, but not too nturl (s bov, it is NOT rl convrstion). void dvrbs nd dilogu tgs whr possibl i.. Jill sid wryly. Rding it loud hlps.

Intrsprs dilogu with ction nd movmnt. Kp th chrctrs moving round s lrg chunks of dilogu r lso boring. This is discussd with tchnothrillr uthor JC Hutchins on writing thrillrs.

On ttribution nd dilogu tgs from Lt Th Words Flow. H sid/sh sid is ndd but not vry lin which cn b distrcting. But b crful of th opposit xtrm so th rdr loss sns of who is spking.

Dilogu should rvl motion through words, not through dvrbs. Don't sy "ngrily" whn you cn us ngry words nd dscrib th chrctr/ction portrying ngr. (Show, don't tll!). From Blood Rd Pncil.

Don't us dilogu to xplin th bck story, sying things lik "s you know John, w hv lrdy nvigtd th lost world of urion nd found th goldn goblt…" . From Powr, which lso hs som grt xrciss for dilogu.

For brillint chptr on dilogu, rd "How not to writ novl" which prodis th uthor who is too good for th word 'sid, s wll s xmining misplcd xposition, rndom dvrbs, filur to idntify th spkr nd mor in lugh-out-loud writing book.

My primry flw sms to b tht my rdrs don't think my chrctr would tlk th wy I hv writtn, so my dilogu dos not mtch th prson crtd in th rdr's hd. This is good in wy s I hv vokd spcific chrctr in thir minds, but bd s I hv clrly got th 'voic' wrong! Holly Lisl's dvic hlps hr, "writing good dilogu coms from bing bl to hr voics in your hd tht rn't thr", nd th voics hv to blong to th spcific chrctrs. I m plnning to rd my chptrs out loud nd rctify th issus. I m still on first drft so I m not frtting too much but dilogu is on of th rs tht hs stoppd m writing so I wnt to continu lrning bout it.

Now tht you'v bgun plnning your NNoWriMo novl, it's tim to think mor bout your chrctrs. Ystrdy I xplind wht th thr dimnsions of chrctr r nd wht is includd in ch on. Whil ll thr dimnsions of chrctr r importnt nd ncssry if you wnt to crt chrctr tht's complling nd blivbl, dimnsion numbr 2 (bckstory nd innr dmons) is just littl bit mor importnt.

Why?

Bcus, s Lrry Brooks xplins in his Book, Th Thr Dimnsions of Chrctr:

Your min chrctr nds to ovrcom his/hr innr dmons prior to his/hr finl showdown with th story's ntgonist, nd th ovrcoming of thos innr dmons bcoms th nbling fctor tht hlps him/hr conqur ll xtrior obstcls.

Tht's why you nd to focus on th innr dmons nd mk thm rlly complling nd rlly blivbl—It's going to b th thing tht mks or brks your min chrctr.

Bcus if your chrctr cn't ovrcom hr innr dmons (or if you cn't convinc rdrs sh's ctully ovrcom thm or tht thy'r vn worth trying to ovrcom in th first plc), sh cn't b th hro of th story.

nd th protgonist hs to b th hro. Or th story won't work.

Som Common Innr Dmons

So wht counts s n innr dmon? Hr's list of som of th most common ons (xcrptd from Brooks' Book):

Cowrdic
Slfishnss
ddiction
Fr
Concit
rrognc
Htrd
Rsntmnt
Bis
Lck of confidnc
Stupidity
Gnius
Hritg
Povrty

Ignornc
Sociopthic
Insnsitivity
Nivt
spotty morl compss
Sxul dvinc

“In gnrl, ny spct of humnity tht isn’t in lin with xpcttions of othrs or th ccptd ground ruls of succss within th boundris of your story,” Brooks sys.

Mor bout Bckstory

Whn you’r crting chrctr for your novl, you should know s much bout th chrctr s possibl. But tht dosn’t mn you should shr ll th informtion you know bout th chrctr with your rdrs. Somtims, lss rlly is mor.

Icbrg Principl

Brooks tlks bout this principl in his Book. Tht principl is:
Show 10 prcnt of your chrctr’s bckstory

Wht tht mns:

Know vrything bout th chrctr’s bckstory, but kp most of it on th “DL.”

“Flshbck scns solly for th purpos of xplining bckstory r nvr good id,” Brooks sys in his Book. “You should b mor subtl nd rtful in dlivring bckstory s prt of nrrtiv flow.”

Only includ bckstory tht movs th plot of your novl forwrd or is ncssry in ordr for th rdr to undrstnd wht is hppning in th story.

Gring up for NNoWriMo? Good for you. You'v lwys wntd to writ novl nd nxt month you'r going to do it.

But rmmbr tht most first novls nvr s print. ditors cll thm "prctic novls." Lik ny othr profssion, writing rquirs long lrning procss. But thr r fw things tht will giv your first novl bttr chnc in th mrktplc.

1) DO writ in gnr tht's bing rd. You my hv lwys drmd of writing swping Michnrsqu sg, Zn Gry wstrn, or strm-of-consciousnss Krouc rmbl, but th sd truth is it's not likly to s print. Publishing hs fshion cycls. I'm not tlling you to follow vry hot trnd—wht's sizzling now will b ovr by th tim you'v got th book finishd—but do b wr of wht might b tough sll down th rod. Rd lots of book rviws. B wr of wht's slling. Visit your locl bookstor nd librry oftn nd rd, rd, rd.

2) DON'T writ novl tht imitts scrnply. If you'r undr 65, you probbly hv th TV scrnply formt srd into your consciousnss. This mns tht whn you'r writing first novl, you hv stuff to unlrn. In novl, w don't hv to rly so hvily on wht th chrctrs sy. In fct, thy oftn don't sy wht thy'r fling t ll.

 rdr prcivs th ction from INSID th hd of th chrctr/s rthr thn viwing it from OUTSID. In movi, w'r pping toms, wtching th ction through cmr lns; in novl, w'r xprincing it. novl is mindscp, not lndscp.

3) DO void n omniscint point of viw or constnt hd-hopping. Choos fwr thn thr point-of-viw chrctrs nd you'll sv yourslf ton of grif ltr on. Omniscint nd multipl points of viw rn't "wrong" but thy'r old-fshiond nd tough to do wll. Thy tnd to slow nd confus th rdr nd turn off gnts.

4) DON'T dpnd on prologu to initit tnsion. Thr's much dbt bout prologus out hr in th blogosphr, but vst mjority of gnts nd ditors dislik thm. My blogpost on prologus is hr. Why shoot yourslf in th font?

5) DO mk sur your story hs protgonist nd n ntgonist. Thr hs to b on min chrctr. qulity is idl in th rl world, but in nrrtiv, on prson hs to domint. If nothr chrctr wlks in nd tris to tk ovr, tll hr you'll put hr in short story ltr. Othrwis, chng th focus of your novl. (Not lwys bd id. Somtims w strt with th wrong point-of-viw chrctr.)

nd rmmbr n ntgonist isn't ncssrily mustch-twirling villin. It cn b sitution, diss, or socity itslf—nything strong nough to thwrt your chrctr for th whol nrrtiv.

6) DON'T choos protgonist who's sily stisfid. Your min chrctr hs to wnt somthing. Bdly. Stisfid popl mk lovly compnions, but s soon s your chrctrs gt wht thy wnt, your story is ovr.

7) DO ctivt your innr sdist. Nvr lt your chrctrs gt wht thy nd. Throw s mny obstcls into thir pth s possibl. Hurt thm. Mim thm. Giv thm crul prnts nd girlfrinds who r prpring to kill thm for lin lizrd food. It's OK. You'll solv thir problms in th nd. Thn won't you fl good?

8) DON'T put somthing in novl "bcus tht's th wy it rlly hppnd." vn if your story is bsd on your own xprincs, rmmbr rl lif is mostly boring. Tht's why w rd fiction.

If you cn writ fst (nd wll), you'r st for succss.

You'll b bl to pump out blog posts, nwslttr contnt, fr books nd mor – without killing yourslf in th procss. You'll b bl to mt ddlins. You cn pric by th projct, nd mk grt hourly rt.

But … chncs r, you'r not yt bl to writ s fst s you wnt.

Myb it tks you two hours to complt 500 word blog post – on good dy. Myb you just cn't find tim to gt tht book finishd.

Hr’s how to mssivly incrs your writing spd, in svn sy stps.

Stp #1: Find Your Bst Writing Tim

This is crucil. Don’t kid yourslf tht ll hours r qul.

You nd to know whn you’r most productiv.

For m, it’s mornings, round 8m to 11m. If I’m lucky, I’ll lso gt n ftrnoon spurt, myb 2pm – 4pm.

For you, it could b morning, noon or night. You probbly hv gut sns lrdy of your bst hours. Now, rl lif might b gtting in th wy – prhps you hv to drop th kids off t school t 8.30m, or you’v got dy job. But you cn still us your bst hours t th wknds, or look for wys to shift othr obligtions.

If you’r not sur wht your bst writing tim is, xprimnt! Try out diffrnt tim slots nd s wht fls bst.

Stp #2: Minimiz th Risk of Intrruptions

So, you’v got two goldn hours st sid to writ – 10m – 12 noon on Sturdy. You sit down t th computr, rdy to typ.

nd th phon rings. It’s sls cll.

Thn your prtnr coms in nd sks if you wnt to go out to lunch ltr.

Thn cht window pops up on your computr, from frind you’v not tlkd to in whil.

Is it ny surpris tht you don’t gt much writing don?

Instd of snpping t your prtnr nd moning bout sls clls, hr’s wht to do:

Turn off your mobil. Unplug th lndlin (or mk sur tht your prtnr/kids/roommt knows tht it’s thir job to nswr it).

Tll popl in your houshold tht you’r going to writ. xplin tht you’ll b fr to cht t 12 noon, but you’d pprcit not bing intrruptd bfor thn.

Work in room on your own, nd clos th door. If you’r sitting downstirs in th kitchn, you’r much mor likly to gt intrruptd.

If you rlly cn’t gt ny pc t hom, grb your notpd or your lptop nd hd out to coff shop.

Stp #3: Cut Out Distrctions

Rducing intrruptions hlps lot. But distrctions r dth to writing, too.

Thy look lik this:

You dcid tht you rlly must tidy your dsk bfor you strt writing.

Whn you gt stuck, two whol sntncs into your pic, you find yourslf opning up your inbox to s whthr thr's nything xciting in thr.

ftr writing 200 words, you twt your word count. You thn click on link to n musing YouTub vido, nd rmmbr blog post tht you wntd to rd. n hour ltr, you wondr whr your tim wnt.

Hlf-wy through your pic, you rliz tht you nd prticulr sttistic. You stop immditly nd look it up. Whil you'r doing so, n dvrt for chp lptops ctchs your y, nd you cn't rsist chcking it out.

Som distrctions might sm lgitimt. ftr ll, your dsk is untidy. nd you do nd to know tht sttistic.

Th thing is, you don't nd to tidy your dsk or look things up right wy. ll of tht cn wit for n hour or two.

Thr r plnty of wys to cut out distrctions. You might:

Unplug your intrnt cbl (or switch off your wirlss).

Us progrm lik DrkRoom (PC) or WritRoom (Mc) so tht you'v got plin, cln, full-scrn writing nvironmnt.

Clr wy ny distrcting objcts from th room. Do you rlly wnt to spnd two hours trying to solv tht Rubik's cub?

Stp #4: Writ n Outlin

On hug mistk is to lp into your pic without plnning hd. If you do tht, you'r going to nd up writing for fw prgrphs, thn gtting hoplssly stuck.

Outlining dosn't nd to b complx, spcilly if you'r writing somthing short (lik blog post). This post, for instnc, strtd out s titl nd svn subhdings. I spnt lss thn fiv minuts on th outlin – nd it's svd m ton of hd-scrtching tim.

Whn you writ n outlin:

You cn spot (nd fix) ny obvious flws or problms. Prhps it bcoms clr tht you'r trying to tckl too much, or tht your topic isn't vry wll thought out.

Your subconscious immditly strts coming up with ids for ch point. Onc you strt to writ, it's lot sir to gt your thoughts down onto th pg.
Th whol projct looks much mor mngbl. You'v brokn it down into smll stps.
s you writ, th outlin continus to hlp, by kping you motivtd. You cn s xctly how fr you'v com – nd how fr you'v got lft to go. It's sy to kp on writing whn you know you'v only got thr points lft to covr.

Stp #5: St Timr
I'v com cross fw writrs who ht using timrs, so – s with ny dvic – fl fr to ditch this if it dosn't work for you.
Hving sid tht, I think timrs r brillint. Whn I know I'v only got 20 or 30 or 45 minuts, I sty focusd. I writ fstr. I don't succumb to th urg to chck mils – thy cn wit till my writing tim is up.
Timrs hlp you to writ for short bursts. t th momnt, I'm trying out systm whr I writ for 20 – 25 minuts thn tk brk to xrcis for fiv minuts. It's bn grt for my nrgy lvls, nd I'v bn gtting mor writing don in lss tim.
You cn us your phon or n lrm clock s timr, or us sit lik Tick Tock Timr or .ggtimr – whtvr works for you.
xprimnt with diffrnt timd bursts: try just fiv or tn minuts if you'r nw to this, nd grdully work up to mor. Whil tht timr is going, writ. No xcuss.

Stp #6: Strt Whrvr You Wnt
You do not nd to strt off by writing th introduction or Chptr On.
In fct, it's oftn good id not to. Instd, jump in to th middl of your pic. Writ th first subsction – or th third.
Tht wy, you'll gt moving much fstr … nd by th tim you'v finishd th bulk of your pic, you'll hv bttr sns of wht nds to go in th introduction. Sinc you hv n outlin (s stp #4), you won't nd to worry bout gtting off trck or writing somthing tht dosn't fit in.
Convrsly, if you lik to strt t th bginning nd work through to th nd, tht's fin too. Thr's no "right" wy to do this.

Wht mttrs is tht you don't spnd twnty minuts string t blnk scrn, wondring how to bgin. Just gt moving!

Stp #7: Don't dit Whil You Writ

Hmm, I didn't phrs tht vry wll. nd should tht comm go thr? Myb I'd bttr split th sntnc into two. Would "gigntic" b bttr thn "hug"?

If your thoughts go somthing lik tht whn you'r writing, thn you nd to switch off your intrnl ditor.

Writ. Thn dit.

Kp rpting tht to yourslf until it sinks in. Bcus it's rlly importnt.

Whn you'r writing, you'r crting somthing. You'r putting words onto formrly blnk pg, nd you'r tlling story or xplining n id or shring your thoughts in cohrnt form.

Don't mk this vn hrdr thn it nds to b. Don't dmnd instnt prfction.

Onc you'v crtd somthing, thn you cn strt to b criticl bout it. You cn look t whthr your prgrphs r in th right ordr, nd whthr you nd to dd mor trnsitions. You cn twk your subhdings to mk thm snppir. You cn rword ny clunky or confusing sntncs.

I'm not going to suggst tht you ti yourslf in knots ovr this. It's fin to hit th "dlt" ky occsionlly, if you typ somthing wrong. It's oky to chng your mind nd rstrt sntnc if you nd to.

Just mk sur tht most of th tim, you'r mking forwrd progrss. nd don't stop hlf wy through to dit prgrph on – tht cn wit until th nd.

If you follow ll th stps hr, you could doubl or vn tripl your currnt writing spd. So giv thm try – nd lt us know how you gt on! Th commnts r opn…

Is thr ny point whr rdr might fl lik putting th book down?

Dos th novl fl lik it's bout popl doing things?

Dos th plot fl forcd or unnturl?

Is th story out of blnc? Too much ction? Too much rction?

1. Kp Nbbing Ids

ll through th rvision procss, your mind will b working on your plot. Whn you slp, t, showr, driv. Th boys in th bsmnt nvr stop.

So b bl to nb ny ids tht occur to you t odd momnts. Hv pns nd ppr hndy in your hom, cr, offic, bckpck. Don't hsitt to jot down wht occurs to you, without judgmnt. Ltr, you cn sift through your nots nd dcid wht to incorport.

2. Crt Two Trjctoris

Crt two trjctoris for your min chrctr: prsonl problm nd plot problm.

H's in his prsonl problm s th story bgins, or it dvlops soon thrftr.

Th plot problm riss whn th min conflict is nggd.

Th two don't ncssrily intrsct s th story movs long, though thy cn. But th prsonl complicts how h dls with th plot.

3. dd nothr Lvl of Compliction

In Robrt Cris's thrillr Hostg, burnd-out hostg ngotitor Jff Tlly is suddnly fcd with tns stnd-off in n othrwis plcid bdroom community. Fin nd dndy on its own, but Cris thn dds nothr lvl: Th hostg insid th hous hs in his possssion incriminting finncil vidnc ginst th mob, bcus h's th mob's ccountnt! Th mob nds to gt tht vidnc bfor th cops. To put prssur on Tlly, th mob kidnps his x-wif nd dughtr nd holds thm hostg. This ddd lvl of compliction suprchrgs th ntir book.

Don't hold bck on mking troubl. Hv you bn rsistnt to mking things s bd s possibl for your ld? Did you pull your punchs whn crting obstcls, chllngs, points of conflict? Wr you too nic to your chrctrs?

Go through your mnuscript, nd for ch scn dfin wht th point of conflict is.

4. dd Chrctr

Too fw chrctrs cn rsult in thin plot. Too mny cn rndr it ovrwight. But just th right chrctr ddd t just th right tim prsnts whol univrs of plot possibilitis. If your plot is plodding, considr dding nw, dynmic chrctr to th procdings. Giv this chrctr stk in th plot. Giv him

plnty of rsons to b for or ginst th othr chrctrs. Srch out possibl bckstory rltionships btwn th nw chrctr nd th xisting cst.

5. Bwr of Unmotivtd ctions

Do you hv chrctrs doing things tht rn't justifid in th story? chrctr cn't just show up. You nd to giv your chrctrs rson why thy ct th wy thy do. Look to:

dsirs
yrnings
dutis
psychologicl wounds
pssion

6. Chng Stting

Usully th min stting of your plot is going to rmin s is, bcus you hv so much invstd in it. You'v don rsrch, st up loctions for scns, nd so on. But if it's possibl to chng, giv it som considrtion. Will it dd lvls to your plot? Mor xciting possibilitis? vn if you cn't chng th min loction, mny of your scns cn b nlivnd in this wy. Look spcilly to ths loctions:

rsturnts
kitchns
living rooms
offics
crs

Ths r th plcs most of us r in most of th tim. For tht rson, thy'r ovrly fmilir. Look t ch instnc of loction lik th bov nd s if you cn't find frshr vnu. For xmpl, instd of rsturnt scn, wht if th chrctrs wr outsid ting hot dogs on pir? Or t crnivl whr thr's too much nois? You don't hv to mov vry scn, of cours, but this is on wy to shrpn plot.

Just th othr dy th Wll Strt Journl snt big notic to writrs, th gist of which ws, "Don't quit your dy job." ccording to th rticl, I could sll not only my first nd scond novls, but lso my

fifth, twlfth nd svntnth nd still hv bttr luck covring th rnt by collcting bottl dposits on my nighbors rcyclbls. Imgin my disppointmnt whn I hd to put th lttr to my boss — writtn in momnt of uphori upon complting th first drft of my novl ("Dr Jffry, Soon I will b rich nd fmous writr, nd th dmnds on my tim nd crtiv nrgy my no longr prmit m to show up for work…") — bck in th drwr. gin.

So this is my fling: If I hv to continu hving two occuptions, writr nd doctor, I nd to find wys for ch to fd th othr. I'v lwys bn intrstd in th connctions btwn writing nd mdicin — th rol of storis, th dtctiv work, th obsrvtion — but now tht I know I'll b tlking low cholstrol dits nd chcking for hrnis right through th blu-hir yrs, finding ths connctions sms mor importnt thn vr.

Tody's topic: look t som of th "goldn ruls" of mdicin to s how thy pply to writing. (I promis, by th wy, tht hmorrhoids will not b discussd. No sputum or fungl rshs ithr.)
Rul #1: "First, do no hrm."

Oky, not to strt off on th wrong foot, but this on just gts thrown out. grt rul for doctoring but writing . . . wll, it dmnds som boldnss nd you cn't b worrying bout things lik doing hrm.

Nxt.

Rul #2: "Th ptint is th bst tchr."

Not th txt books, not th CM courss, not th gnius who discovrd Wird Rr Diss X. Th ptint. To m this trnslts to: "It's th work itslf tht tchs bst." It's th writing. It's th thinking. It's struggling with th chrctrs who do not bhv th wy you intnd, th nding tht dos not dlivr th sns of compltion you'd hopd for. It's fiddling with th words nd th prgrphs nd th chptrs. Workshops cn b lifsvr (sign m up), probing th minds of grt writrs cn uncovr gms, rding good stuff is must – but it's th ctul work of writing tht tchs bst.

Rul #3 (corollry to Rul #2): “Whn ll ls fils, go bck to th ptint.”

Whn th dignosis isn’t thr or th trtmnt dosn’t work, go bck nd s th ptint. Tk it from th top, hr th story from th bginning, xmin ll ovr gin. Trnsltion to writing: I don’t think this mns to strt your novl or story gin, but I do think this mns go bck to th bsics. Do you know your chrctrs wll nough? Do you undrstnd thir motivtions? Is your plot consistnt with wht your chrctrs would sy nd do?

Rul #4: “If you think of it, you’d bttr look for it.”

littl xplntion on this on. pulmonry mbolus (blood clot to th lung) is lif thrtning vnt nd th rly signs cn b ll too sy to miss. Th goldn rul for doctors on pulmonry mboli: if th possibility vn crosss your mind, no mttr how UNLIKLY, you’d bttr go hd nd mk sur th ptint dosn’t hv on. Tht’s bcus somtims you r picking up on hrd-to-dfin lmnts of th whol pictur nd, in th bck of your mind, nothr kind of thought procss is t work.
My trnsltion for writrs: Don’t ignor your subconscious. Thr’s good stuff in thr. Somtims flsh coms long smingly out of lft fild, but you sns tht this is ky prt of tht odd puzzl of writing powrful fiction. You’r probbly right or, t th vry lst, it’s worth xploring.

Rul #5 (vrint of Rul #4): “Brodn your diffrntil.”

Diffrntil dignosis, tht is. Th list of problms or dignoss tht could xplin th ptint’s condition. Kp trying, kp your mind opn, stp bck nd rconsidr options you my hv thrown out.
Hr’s quot from grt nd wis physicin who undrstnds th puzzl-lik qulity of dignosis, womn nmd Fith Fitzgrld who tchs mdicin t th Univrsity of Cliforni in Sn Digo. Sh dscribs n vning sh onc spnt with room full of Nobl Lurts. Hr obsrvtions:
“Thy did not hv n ordrly, disciplind thought procss… wht ths popl did ws lss linr thn it ws mosic. Thy hd n uninhibitd cscd of — to my mind — unconnctd ids, ll of which pprd in thir minds nd somhow smd to hold qul pr-minnc. I thought initilly, ‘Thy r ll crzy!’ Wht ws fscinting ws tht thy’d ll throw up ths littl ids s if thy wr th bright bits of mosic, look t

how thy fll, s if it stisfid nd if it didn't, thy'd throw thm up gin nd try gin. It's th synthsis of tht combind ordr nd disciplin nd chos tht is th dignostic thought procss."
Similrly with writing fiction — you nd th ordr nd disciplin, but you nd th chos, too.
So kp thinking, kp throwing things up thr, kp trying gin.

Oh, nd Rul #6?

Quit smoking.
nd t your vgtbls.
nd gt som xrcis, wouldj?
P.S. For nyon who didn't know this, th chrctr of Shrlock Holms ws bsd on Josph Bll, on of rthur Conn Doyl's instructors in mdicl school.

Ltly I'v bn plotting nd plnning my nxt novl. s prt of th procss, I fill out n xtnsiv chrctr worksht for my min chrctrs.

In th plnning stgs, on of th things I try to do is gt clr pictur of wht my chrctrs look lik. I ccomplish this in numrous wys. If my chrctr dosn't lrdy hv rl portrit from history, I pick on from photos of ctors or modls. I lso fill in th physicl dscription prt of my chrctr worksht—mking not of vry dtil (long with synonyms, simils, mtphors, nd wys othr chrctrs might dscrib th prson).

nd ys, prt of th dscription includs y nd hir color. I bliv w s writrs nd to know s much s possibl bout our chrctrs if w wnt thm to com to lif.

Howvr, Michl Tshjin brought up grt point in rcnt rviw sh did on my dbut book, Th Prchr's Brid: Sh sid, "Whn it coms to physicl dscription in mny contmporry works, writrs oftn rsort to 'hir-colour-y-colour' dscriptions. This is somwht lmntry pproch. In Th Prchr's Brid, Ms. Hdlund gos fr byond this scop of mdiocr physicl dscription of chrctrs."

Michl sits coupl of xmpls from my book which I'll shr s wll:

• Dscription of Vicr Burton on pg 24: His brthing ws whzy, s though h struggld to ctch his brth. Whnvr this hppnd, his shouldrs hunchd furthr, nd his chst snk inwrd lik bowl.

Michl sys: “Th uthor givs us no dscription of Vicr Burton's hir, fc, or ys, nd yt w hv this vivid pictur of th wy h tlks nd brths nd r rmindd of this vry tim h spks up gin in th book.”

• Dscription of lizbth’s suitor Smul Muddl on pg 29: Smul pulld up his brchs, which hd hbit if slipping blow his protruding blly. H hitchd thm high bov his wistlin, s if to giv thm plnty of sliding room.

Michl sys: “Throughout th story, w r lft with nxt to no dscription of Smul xcpt for his protruding blly nd ovrlrg brchs; nd yt w r not lft wnting for mor idntifiction.”

Somtims w cn rly too much on hir nd y color in our dscriptions of our chrctrs to th nglct of othr tchniqus. How cn w go dpr? Hr r som mthods to kp in mind whn dscribing our chrctrs:

1. Min chrctrs will likly nd hir nd y dscriptions (spcilly in crtin gnrs lik romnc). In fct, w should hlp our rdrs to visuliz our min chrctrs corrctly right from th strt (vrsus confusing thm two-thirds of th wy through th book by springing n img on thm tht might not mtch th prson thy’v lrdy visulizd). Howvr, ths kinds of bsic dscriptions cn b don in crtiv snippts tht r subtly wovn in.

2. Minor chrctrs will probbly NOT nd hir nd y dscriptions (unlss hir or ys ply rol in th plot). Othrwis, why bothr mntioning thm? W cn pick much mor crtiv wys to dscrib thm—prfrbly with trits tht dd to th story in som wy (whthr mood, tnsion, tc.). Blk Snydr in Sv Th Ct dscribs this tchniqu by sying, “Mk sur vry chrctr hs ‘ Limp nd n yptch’ . . . somthing mmorbl tht will stick him in th rdr’s mind.”

3. Giv our chrctrs uniqu tgs. tg is somthing tht will hlp idntify chrctr throughout th book. Tgs cn b physicl (bulbous nos), vrbl (prticulr phrs only tht chrctr uss), chrctristic (timidity), or n ction (nil-biting).

4. Rmmbr dscription is only smll prt of bringing chrctr to lif. In fct, dscription lon is not nough. W must wv th shring of thir physicl pprnc mong othr tchniqus—how our chrctrs rct to situtions, thir gols, thir mthod of hndling conflict, th wy thy njoy lif, tc. ll of ths littl things com togthr to lv n imprssion in th rdr's mind bout who tht prson rlly is.

My Summry: Dscribing our chrctrs is lik most spcts of writing—w hv to rjct th sy (oftn clichéd) img tht coms to our minds first. Instd w nd to brinstorm, dig dpr, nd find crtiv, intrsting, nd uniqu portryls tht will dlight our rdrs.
How bout you? Hv you flln into th y nd hir color dscription trp? How do you push dpr to find mor uniqu wys of dscribing your chrctrs?

I oftn hr tht flshbcks in fiction r lwys bd. Is tht tru? If not, thn how do you know if th flshbck in your novl is working? nd wht do you do if it isn't?

Crolin postd this qustion on my "sk Qustion For My Blog" pg:

I m writing in first prson nd hving difficulty with insrting bck story. Currntly my dilmm is with flshbcks. To us or not to us thm, nd if so how much is too much, or whn is th bst us of thm? Frquntly whn I rsort to nrrtiv in flshbcks plc I think wht I hv writtn is boring nd stiff. Wht is your tk on th flshbck?

Rndy sz: flshbck hs on thing going for it nd on thing going ginst it.

Wht's good bout flshbck is tht it's writtn in "immdit scn"–mning tht it's shown hppning right hr, right now, minut by minut, without summry. Tht's th most complling kind of fiction (lthough if your novl is 100% immdit scn, somthing is probbly wrong).

Wht's bd bout flshbck is tht it's ystrdy's nws. Or lst yr's nws. In xtrm css, it cn b lst millnnium's nws. It's bckstory. Flshbck is complling wy to show bckstory, but it's still bckstory.

If you'r going to us flshbck, gnrlly good rul of thumb is to wit until th rdr bsolutly, positivly MUST know th informtion contind in th flshbck. Thn show s littl of th flshbck s possibl. Thn rturn to th min story.

No rdr on th plnt vr sid, "Wow, I'm going to buy this book bcus I'm dying to hr wht hppnd bfor it tks plc!"

Nop. Rdrs buy book bcus thy'r dying to hr wht hppns DURING TH MIN STORY.

Bckstory is ncssry prt of ny story. Strong bckstory mks strong story. But in writing fiction, prctic th fin rt of withholding informtion. Tht crts mystry. It crts suspns. It kps your rdr rding.

Cn you hold off on showing ny flshbcks until t lst 25% of th wy into your story? If not, thn myb th rl story isn't your story. Myb your rl story is th bckstory nd you should hv strtd soonr.

Cn you hold off on showing ny flshbcks until you'r 75% of th wy into your story? If so, you might hv rl killr of story. Rmmbr, s long s you'v got scrt, your rdr wnts to know it. Onc you'v told th scrt, your rdr no longr wnts to know it.

Dly, dly, dly on tht psky bckstory, whthr it's flshbck or ny othr kind.

Wht dos it rlly mn to 'show don't tll' nd how dos writr DO this?

Tht's ctully vry dp nd involvd subjct. I could bgin to do justic to it wr I to ddict n ntir blog post to it. Which, com to think of, I kind of did whn I gust-bloggd for Skrvill lst yr. So you cn rd tht.

In rlly tiny nutshll, though, it is this: you rmmbr bck in grd school nd high school how nglish tchrs wr lwys dmonishing you to "rd btwn th lins"? Prsonlly, I lwys htd tht bcus I hd no id wht thy mnt whn thy sid tht. Now I undrstnd tht my tchrs just didn't know how to xplin th diffrnc btwn showing nd tlling.

Whn thy sid "rd btwn th lins," wht thy wr rlly sying ws "this writr did rlly good job of showing, nd bcus of tht, thr's lot w cn tll bout th popl nd th story vn though it's not sttd dirctly." Hr's n xmpl. Imgin you knw vrything you currntly know bout lif, litrtur, nd populr cultur xcpt tht you hd somhow rmind 100% oblivious to th vry xistnc of Jn ustn's Prid nd Prjudic. Now somon hnds you th book, tlls you nothing, nd sys "rd." Wht dos Jn ustn giv you? This:

> It is truth univrslly cknowldgd, tht singl mn in possssion of good fortun must b in wnt of wif.

Tht's showing. How do w know? Bcus without tlling us wht it is, w lrdy know wht th mjor thm of th book is. Hd Jn ustn bn givn to tlling instd of showing, sh might hv pnnd this instd:

> This, dr rdr, is romnc novl.

On is showing: Jn ustin givs us th vidnc w nd, stright wy, to dduc 'l Shrlock Holms, tht this book is romnc. But nvr dos sh tll us tht fct flt-out.

Tlling is whn you dirctly stt th dp truths you wnt rdrs to know. Showing is whn you don't, whn you nvr do, but instd only giv th vidnc rdrs nd to figur out thos dp truths for

thmslvs. Tht's wht "Show, don't tll" mns. It's th flip-sid of "rd btwn th lins," bcus showing is how you put nything btwn th lins in th first plc.

Why should writr hir book doctor rthr thn sking frinds, fmily, tchrs, nd critiqu prtnrs to dit thir book?

Wll, why do you go to mdicl doctor instd of sking frinds, fmily, tchrs, nd critiqu prtnrs tll you wht to do bout tht prsistnt rsh? Bcus thr's diffrnc btwn sying "Yup, looks lik rsh," nd sying "Tht rsh is symptom of nmi cusd by undrlying kidny diss. W'd bttr gt you on low protin dit nd tlk bout lifstyl chngs."

You hir book doctor bcus, whil rdrs r common, trind nlyticl rdrs r not. Frinds, fmily, tchrs, mothrs, t ctr—vn if thy'r vid rdrs—usully don't hv th nlyticl skills to ctully dignos your writing. Untrind rdrs, thos who simply lov to rd, r grt t tlling you wht thy don't lik. Thy'r grt t tlling you whn somthing isn't working for thm.

But thy'r usully lousy t tlling you xctly why tht somthing isn't working for thm, in such wy tht you cn s wht to do bout it. It's fdbck, but it's not hlpful fdbck. Tlling you "I didn't lik tht prt whr th cr brks down on th bridg" isn't so-clld ctionbl fdbck. It dosn't tll you wht to do bout it. It's "Yup, looks lik rsh," ll ovr gin, lving you no wisr s to whthr you should put lotion on it or chng your dit.

Sdly (though not for m, bcus othrwis I couldn't mk living doing wht I do), vn most writrs r lousy t this. vn most writrs, s I discovrd whn I strtd sking out constructiv fdbck for my own novls, r no bttr t critiquing thn non-writrs.

You don't go to book doctor for n "I likd it" or "I htd it" vrdict. You go to book doctor for dignosis nd prscription. You go to book doctor bcus you wnt your novl's rsh to ctully gt bttr.

Wht dvic would you offr to nw uthors?

Thr r hundrds of fiddly littl bits of dvic I could giv to nw rdrs, non mor worthy thn th othrs. nd you lrdy skd bout “Show, don’t tll,” so I cn’t us tht (though I would). I guss wht I would sy is this:

Rcogniz tht this is hrd thing you’r doing, nd chck your go t th door.

Th thing is, wll writtn novl is dcptiv thing. Whn don right, novl flows pst th rdr so smoothly, so ffortlssly, rdrs don’t rlly vn fl lik thy’r rding. Thy’r just njoying grt story. grt novl is such trnsprnt, trnscndnt rding xprinc, tht rdrs don’t fl lik thy’r doing ny work t ll. Though in fct thir brins r working quit hrd, vry scond, it fls so sy tht w’r lft thinking tht it must lso b sy to writ on.

Nothing could b furthr from th truth. It’s sy, rltivly spking, to nil som old rollr-skt whls onto coupl of bords nd cll it go-krt. nd it’ll go, but you’r in for prtty rough rid. Just gtting round th block is going to lv you windd. It is worlds mor difficult to build 450 horspowr V8 high prformnc luxury sdn tht rids lik drm nd will tk you from Boston to Chicgo with lss ffort thn tht onc round th block on th go-krt.

I doubt I nd to unpck this mtphor for you. Suffic it to sy writing novls is hrd. You will nd to lrn lot of nw skills, both in writing crft nd story crft. You will nd to discovr tht story crft is, in fct, wholly diffrnt skill st thn writing crft. You will mk lot of mistks long th wy. This is invitbl.

But if you go into it thinking you’r God’s own gift to litrtur, nd nobody cn tll you nything bout your story, nd how dr thy try to influnc your rtistic gnius with thir cooki cuttr notions bout conflict nd chrctr rcs nd rising th stks nd showing vrsus tlling—

Wll, lt’s just sy if you go into it with tht ttitud I cn promis you somthing ls tht will hppn: not only will your writing suck—tht hrdly mks you spcil—but you will lso nvr improv.

It’s just plin hrd to writ novl. You nd criticism. You nd fdbck. But ll th hlpful fdbck in th world won’t do you lick of good if your go is blocking you from hring it.

ugust 15, 2013 04:08 UTC

Tgs: intrviw, book doctor, show don't tll, vidnc, critiqu, nlysis, dignosis, fdbck, dvic, go, writing, writing crft, story, story crft

Prmlink Prmlink | Commnts dd commnt | Twt this! Twt this!

Wht I would hv sid, prt on

Rcntly, I ws pprochd to do n intrviw bout book doctoring. s min is poorly undrstood cornr of th diting world, I ws dlightd for th opportunity. Unfortuntly, th intrviw didn’t work out. Th rsons r nithr hr nor thr, but th qustions thy wntd to sk m wr good ons, nd I’d still lik to nswr thm. So, without furthr do:

Wht is book doctor?

It’s clvr monikr for “frlnc dvlopmntl ditor.” Which bsiclly mns I writ book rports for living. xtrmly long, xcrucitingly tchnicl book rports, dsignd to hlp spiring uthors produc much strongr nxt-drft of thir novl.

Whn in th writing procss should n uthor ngg book doctor?

Wll, thr’s th idl, nd thn thr’s th prcticl.

Idlly, popl would contct m whil thy’r still outlining thir book. Think bout it this wy: th sist tim to fix issus with th plot is bfor you’v ctully writtn th story. Onc th story is st down word by lborious word, it bcoms much hrdr to chng. Fixing plot problms t tht stg mns myb moving scn hr or thr, dding bridg scn, twking fw dtils.

Tht's if you'r lucky. Fr mor commonly, though, fixing plot issu mns chnging somthing dp in th bons of th story. It mns ltring chrctrs, vnts, motivtions, or othr dtils which dmnd updts to mny scns. It cn mn ripping out whol chunks of th book to r-drft som sction of th plot. Worst cs—but by no mns rr cs—it mns dmitting tht whil th cor story id my b good, th plot s it stnds is too much of mss to fix, nd thn writing nw on from scrtch.

Myb tht's fin if you don't hv to worry bout th concrns of mking living nd tnding to fmily. But th prpondrnc of writrs I know do hv to worry bout thos things. So idlly, you'll gt your plot problms workd out bforhnd, nd sv yourslf vst tim nd lbor fixing problms tht could hv bn voidd.

(nd ys, wht I just wrot mounts to pro-plottr, nti-pntsr scrd. I'm not trying to dismiss th pntsrs in th udinc. It is crtinly possibl to fly by th st of your pnts nd yt nd up with plot tht holds togthr. But it is lso tru tht th worst, most hphzrd, nonsnsicl plots I'v vr sn from clints hv com from clints who don't plot hd of tim.)

Tht's th idl. But in prctic, lmost nobody contcts m whil thy'r still outlining. Normlly, popl pop into my inbox only ftr thy hv mnuscript in hnd. Tht's fin too. Gnrlly tht mns you'll b doing mor rwriting thn you might hv likd, but it bts giving up on th novl. In my xprinc, th writrs who succd r th ons who don't giv up.

Wht mks for good plot?

If I wr to nm nything spcific (Conflict! Drm! 'Splosions!), somon would invitbly criticiz tht nswr s bing pplicbl only in crtin gnrs. nd thy'd b right. Thr's only on thing I know of tht mks for good plot, no mttr wht gnr you'r writing in. Only on plotting principl tht gnuinly stnds up whthr you'r writing n ction pckd thrillr, cozy mystry, mmoir, or vn quit, introspctiv litrry pic:

Qustions.

good story is on tht constntly riss qustions in th rdr's mind. Curiosity, tht humn driv to know, to figur out, is t th hrt of why rdrs ngg with book. If your nrrtiv is constntly mking us wondr bout stuff—big stuff, littl stuff—chncs r w'll b intrstd, nd will kp turning thos pgs. ftr ll, how ls will w find th nswrs?

smll qustion—who's ringing th doorbll? Who's on th phon?—might only propl us fw sntncs or myb prgrph furthr. Tht's fin. Tht's ll it nds to do. lrgr qustion cn driv us to th nd of th scn or chptr. Th biggst qustions—whodunit? Will Jms Bond sv th world for dmocrcy yt gin?—thos r th qustions tht propl whol storis.

good plot provids lot of qustions, nd thn nswrs thm whn th tim is right. grt plot dos th sm, but crfully mngs th qustions so tht by th tim on qustion hs bn nswrd, somthing ls hs com long to tk its plc. Or svrl things. grt plot wvs qustions nd nswrs togthr into complx, rich pttrn tht kps th rdr totlly hookd until th vry nd. Or vn into squl…

Wht do nw writrs oftn nd th most hlp with?

Two bsic rs. Writing crft, nd story crft.

Writing crft is ll th stuff hving to do with how you put words togthr into sntncs. It's bout writing butiful pros. Nw writrs, no mttr how much thy wrot in school, lmost lwys hv lot to lrn in this r. So do I. It's n ndlss rt, nd I'm convincd it is lwys possibl to improv on's writing. Usully, th grtr frction of my dvlopmntl diting rports r dvotd to hlping writrs s things in thir writing tht rn't so grt, nd xplining how to fix thm.

From my own prspctiv, I'v bn writing novl-lngth fiction for clos to dcd now. I'm lot bttr thn I usd to b. Spnding my dys nlyzing my clints' writing nd xplining to thm how to improv it hs crtinly hlpd mk m bttr writr too. But vn now, I still find nw things in my clints' mnuscripts tht hlp m undrstnd th crft of writing bttr. It nvr nds. Nor, I think, should it. How sd would it b, to know you could not b bttr thn you r?

Story crft is th othr sid of th novlist's coin. It's vrything hving to do with constructing grt plot. Rising qustions is prt of it, but it's lso bout stups nd vnts nd conflicts nd chrctr motivtions nd surpriss. ll tht stuff.

But hr's th thing. Most nw writrs don't undrstnd tht writing crft nd story crft r distinct crfts. Thy r wholly sprt skill sts. I'v sn butiful pros wrppd round som truly wful plots. nd I'v sn th clumsist pros imginbl hiding corkr of plot insid. Just bcus you cn writ dosn't mn you cn tll story.

Most writrs don't undrstnd this. nd rlly, why should thy? Whn, in most of our livs, r w vr xposd to story crft s distinct skill? Not in grd school or high school, tht's for sur. Or t lst, not in th drk gs of th 1980s whn I ws in school. ssy structur? Sur. Story structur? Not so much. Thus, nothr hlthy chunk of my dvlopmntl diting rports r dvotd to hlping writrs s wht is nd isn't working in thir plot, nd offring suggstions for how to fix it.

I'v lrnd lot from rding bunch of first chptrs in row. (I strtd this discussion hr.) I mintin I cn't tch nyon to writ, but I sur cn point out th problms I'm sing ovr nd ovr nd ovr gin.

So hr's brif list.

1. Inxprincd writrs lmost invitbly STRT THIR STORIS IN TH WRONG PLC.

Now, pls, pls rmmbr – I m not tlking bout first drfts, hr. s fr s I'm concrnd, ll first drft hs to do is gt to "Th nd". It dosn't hv to b polishd. It dosn't hv to mk sns to nyon but you. t th Southrn Cliforni Writrs Confrnc this wknd scrnwritr nd novlist Drk Hs rfrrd to his first pss of story s "th vomit drft". xctly. Just gt it ll out – you'll mk sns of it ltr. (for mor on this: Your First Drft Is lwys Going To Suck)

BUT - whn you'v gottn to th nd, you will probbly wnt to strt your story 20, 30, 50 pgs ltr thn you do. nd this is prtly why:

For som rson nwr writrs think thy hv to tll th whol bck story in th first tn pgs. Bck story is not story. So -

2. NVR MIND TH FUCKING BCKSTORY!!!!!

With lmost no xcptions, you should strt your book with n ctul scn, in which your min chrctr (or villin, if tht's who you strt with) is cught up in ction. You should put tht scn down on th pg s if th rdr is wtching movi – or mor spcificlly, CUGHT UP in movi. Th rdr should not just b wtching th ction, but fling th swt, smlling th slt ir, fling th roiling of thir stomch s thy stp into whtvr unknown.

W don't nd to know who this prson is, yt. Lt thm kp scrts. Mk th rdr wondr – curiosity is big hook. Wht w nd to do is gt insid th chrctr's skin.

Hr r two tips:

3. IDNTIFY TH SNSTION ND XPRINC YOU WNT TO VOK IN YOUR RDR – ND THN MK SUR YOU'R VOKING IT.

I cnnot possibly strss this nough. W rd novls to hv n XPRINC. Mk yourslf list of your fvorit books nd idntify wht XPRINC thos books givs you. Sx, trror, bsolut powr, th crzy wondrfulnss of flling in lov? Wht is th prticulr rollrcostr tht tht book (or movi) is? Idntify tht in your fvorit storis nd B SPCIFIC. Thn do th sm for your own story.

Now tht you know wht th xprinc is tht you wnt to crt, strt to look t grt xmpls of books nd films tht succssfully crt tht xprinc FOR YOU. In othr words - Mk List.

4. US LL SIX SNSS.

grt xrcis is to mk sur tht vry thr pgs you'v covrd spcific dtils of wht you wnt th rdr to s, hr, fl, tst, smll, nd sns. ll six ctgoris, vry thr pgs.

5. SHOW, DON’T TLL.

This is on of thos nots tht lwys nnoys m until I hv to rd 15 pgs of “tlling”. Thn I rliz it’s th ssnc of storytlling. If your chrctr hs conflict with hr brothr, thn lt’s s th two of thm fighting – don’t giv m fmily history nd Frudin nlysis.

6. DTIL TH INTRNL DRIVS OF YOUR CHRCTR ND ST TH GNR.

You don’t nd to dtil th fmily tr or whn thy movd to whtvr hous thy’r living in or thir grt lov for thir first stuffd niml.

Wht w nd to know thir DSIR nd WHT IS BLOCKING THM. W nd to fl HOP ND FR for thm. W nd to gt sns of th GNR, strong sns of MOOD nd TON, nd hint of THM.

nd -

7. SOMTHING HS TO HPPN, IMMDITLY, tht givs us n id of WHT TH STORY IS BOUT.

You cn do this to som xtnt by stting mood, ton, gnr, hop nd fr, nd n immdit xtrnl problm, but lso I mn you should gt to your INCITING INCIDNT nd CLL TO DVNTUR s soon s possibl. spcilly if you r nw writr, you cnnot fford to hold this bck. It cn mk or brk your submission, so find wy to gt it into th first fw pgs or t th vry lst, strongly hint t it.

nd for mor discussion nd xmpls of ll of ths trms, s LMNTS OF CT ON.

In th nxt fw posts I'm going to gt vn mor dtild bout ths story lmnts.

Hop vryon hs grt holidy. I'm - wll, obviously - working.

I'm bout to introduc you to th most xhilrting nd usful hnds-on writing xrcis I'v vr xprincd. So ffctiv, in fct, tht it's mor tool thn it is wy to limbr up th ol' crtiv muscls.

So which is it? n xrcis or tool?

Dosn't mttr. ithr wy, I urg you – I chllng you – to try this.

Why? Bcus just sitting thr witing for th blood to mrg from your forhd nd plop onto th pg in th form of n id probbly isn't going to do th trick nytim soon.

If you'r blockd, this will unblock you.

But tht's only on rson to giv this shot.

If you'r fuzzy bout story structur, this will clr th fog.

If you'r looking for wy to turn n id into story, this is lik growth hormons for tht sd.

It'll tk you two to thr hours to complt. Wht coms of tht invstmnt of tim, though, just might chng – or vn sv – your writing lif.

Your mission is to gnriclly dconstruct story.

It's lik shooting vido of Tigr Woods' golf swing. You'r not ripping him off, you'r brking down th fundmntls of wht works. Whn you thn pply wht you'v lrnd to your own gm, trust m, nobody will ccus you of plgirizing grtnss

Bcus th principls of grtnss r lwys gnric, vilbl to vrybody.

Whn you'r finishd, you'll hv gnric tmplt for story from your chosn gnr, somthing you cn pply to your own work s you s fit, in prt or vn in whol.

Or, t minimum, you'll hv somthing tht will nhnc nd rinforc your undrstnding of story rchitctur.

First stp: go to th vido stor nd rnt movi.

It's criticl tht you pick somthing from your gnr. Dosn't mttr if you'v sn it bfor, ntrtinmnt isn't th point. Th closr you cn com to your projct, th bttr.

Why movi instd of book? Bcus book will rquir two to four dys of hrd work to complt this projct. film, two to thr hours. Your cll. Th outcom will b th sm.

Now, grb pd of ppr nd pncil. Or wtch it with your lptop nd th DVD rmot. ithr wy, you'll b stopping th film bout vry 90 sconds or so.

Th nxt prt isn't rockt scinc, but it'll b toughr thn it sounds.

Wtch th first scn, thn pus th DVD.

Now writ th gnric mission of wht you just sw.

For xmpl, th first scn in th film vrsion of Th Cidr Hous Ruls is trin rriving in rmot loction during snow storm. But don't writ tht down.

For this xrcis you'd writ: stblishs loction.

Th nxt fw scns of tht film r quick cuts – montg, rlly – to fmiliriz th viwr with th orphng, which is th stg upon which this drm will unfold. For this, you'd writ: montg, stblishs stting nd drmtic stg.

Do this for vry scn in th film. Rmmbr, th id is to sty s gnric s possibl.

Your nots will b bullts, rthr thn sntncs.

Thy'll look lik this

- mt th protgonist;
- s whr hro works;
- glimps of hro's innr dmon nd bckstory;
- suspicious chrctr, possibl forshdowing;
- ntgonist pprs, but hro unwr of dngr;
- hro is unhppy, but hiding it;

… nd so on.

t som point you'll ncountr scns tht r th mjor milstons of th story. B sur to not this, s follows: plot point on, hro's wif is murdrd.

Somtims you'll com cross stblishing shots tht rn't rlly scns t ll – skip 'm. It won't tk you long to ctch on to wht's importnt to th storytlling procss nd wht isn't.

Somtims, too, you'll ncountr sris of short scns tht combin into mningful squnc. For ths, mk your nottion ccordingly: sris of scns showing th pproching storm.

Writ down whtvr you nd in ordr to clrly undrstnd th mission – not th contnt – of ch scn whn you study th list ltr.

Whn you’r don you’ll hv rostr of 40 to 70 scns, ll writtn in gnric mnnr to th xtnt tht if you showd it to somon, thy wouldn’t hv clu wht movi you’r dscribing.

For ll thy know, you might b showing thm bluprint for your story.

If tht hppns, you’v don this right.

If you’r doing this s n xrcis, you’ll xprinc th powr nd mgic of story structur, prhps s you’v nvr comprhndd it bfor. You’ll hv trnsitiond from studnt to pprntic in two hours tim.

If you’r doing this to unblock your story, you’ll s how similr complxitis cn b workd out, prhps in wy tht will kick-strt fw nw ids of your own. Blls will sound, lrms will go off, nd you’ll prcticlly run to your computr to bring your story bck to lif.

If you’r looking to xpnd n id into story, you’ll hv rodmp tht you could, if so-movd, us to pln compltly diffrnt story using th sm squnc of gnric missions.

It’s not plgirism, it’s inspirtion. I promis you, vn th uthor of th originl pic wouldn’t rcogniz wht you’v writtn s rsult of this procss.

t lst if you’v rmind compltly gnric, front to bck.

Doing this is lik th first tim you hd sx.

You’v rd bout it, hrd bout it, tlkd bout, imgind it. But until you ctully do it, thr’s no wy to truly grsp wht it mns, how it works, nd how it mks you fl.

Bcus this procss llows you to ctully xprinc story in mnnr tht is ordrs of mgnitud mor intimt thn simply wtching movi or rding book.

nd if thr’s on thing your story nds, it’s intimcy. Not just with th rdrs nd th chrctrs, but with th storytlling rchitctur tht mks it work.

nd if you’v bn pying ttntion hr on Storyfix, you lrdy know tht story rchitctur is gnric phnomnon. On you cn lrn, on you cn nd should dopt.

This xrcis – this tool – is on wy to hlp you gt thr quickly.

It gos without sying (but wtch m sy it) tht dilogu is on of th vry most crucil lmnts in novl. Grt dilogu cn mk novl sing. Bd dilogu cn sink it lik ston.

Hr r fw ids on wht mks good dilogu work:

1. Good dilogu is not wighd down by xposition

Whn th dilogu is crrying xposition nd trying to tll th rdr too much, chrctrs nd up sying lot of vry unnturl nd unwildy things. You'll s things lik:

"Rmmbr tht tim w stol th frog from Miss Jnkins nd sh ndd up giving us two hours of dtntion nd tht's how w mt?"
"Yh, totlly! nd now w'r in 6th Grd nd hv to dissct frogs for our scinc projct, which is du tomorrow. I don't know how w'r going to gt it finishd in tim."

So much of this dilogu would lrdy b lrdy pprnt to th chrctrs. Thy'd know how thy mt without hving to tlk bout it, thy'd know thy'r in 6th grd without hving to tlk bout it, thy'd know th scinc projct is du without tlking bout it. So it's vry clr to th rdr tht thy'r not tlking to ch othr: thy'r rlly tlking to th rdr.

xposition nd dilogu only rlly msh whn on chrctr gnuinly dosn't know wht th othr chrctr is tlling thm nd it's nturl for thm to xplin t th momnt thy'r xplining it. Othrwis, if you'r just trying to smush in info, your rdr is going to spot it mil wy.

2. Good dilogu hs purpos nd builds towrd somthing.

Somtims you'll s chrctrs in novls bntring bck nd forth in wy tht is mnt to rvl chrctr or fill spc. Unlss it's just so insnly unblivbly clvr tht th writr mks it work, usully this fls hollow nd, wll, boring.
good convrstion is n scltion. Th dilogu is bout somthing nd builds towrd somthing. If things sty vn nd nutrl, th dilogu just fls mpty.

Chrctrs in novl nvr just tlk. Thr's lwys mor to it.

3. Good dilogu voks th wy popl ctully tlk in rl lif without ctully sounding prcisly lik th wy popl tlk in rl lif.

Prphrsing lmor Lonrd, good writrs lv out th boring prts. This gos doubly for dilogu: it's usully bst to cut to th chs rthr thn spnding tim on th plsntris tht norml popl us in vrydy convrstion.

In rl lif our convrstions wndr round ll ovr th plc, nd trnscribd rl lif convrstion is mndring mss of fr ssocition nd stuttrs. In novl, good convrstion is focusd nd hs point.

nd in novl, dilct, slng, nd voic is usd springly. Just hint of flvor is nough. s my clint Jnnifr Hubbrd wrot, "good dilogu sounds lik convrstion, but is not n xct rproduction of convrstion."

4. Good dilogu rvls prsonlity, nd chrctrs only vry rrly sy prcisly wht thy r thinking.

Humn bings r not vry rticult crturs. Dspit ll th words t our disposl, words tnd to fil us t ky momnts, nd vn whn w know wht w wnt to sy w spnd whol lot of tim trying to dscrib nd rticult wht w fl without bing quit bl to do it proprly. W misundrstnd, ovrmphsiz, undrmphsiz, grsp t wht w mn, nd convrstions go stry. So whn two chrctrs go bck nd forth xplining prcisly wht thy r fling or thinking to ch othr, it dosn't sm rmotly rl.

Good dilogu is instd comprisd of ttmpts t rticultion. Thr's whol lot tht is kpt bck, bcus w humns only rrly rlly truly put our tru flings out thr.

Now, this shouldn't b tkn too fr nd convrstion shouldn't b n ndlss string of misundrstndings (unlss you'r Smul Bcktt), but th wy in which chrctrs xprss thir flings nd how thy rticult wht thy'r fling is on of th most importnt wys of rvling chrctr. r thy rsrvd? Boistrous? Do thy blustr? Hold bck?

Chrctrs who sy xctly wht thy mn r gnric. Chrctrs who tlk round thir motions nd objctivs r much mor intrsting.

5. Good dilogu gos sy on th xclmtions nd xhorttions.

Whn chrctr ovruss "Ughs" nd "Blchs" thy cn sily sound ptulnt. Whn thy ovrus xclmtions, thy cn xhust th rdr with thir xcitbility. Whn thy ovrus vrbl tics nd crutchs, thy cn driv th rdr crzy.

Intrjctions nd grunts r kind of lik crpt clning concntrt. Thy must b dilutd or you'll burn hol in th floor.

6. Good dilogu is boostd by dilogu tgs, gsturs, nd ction, so th rdr cn sily follow who is sying wht.

Poor mlignd dilogu tgs!!! Out thr on th Intrnt it hs ltly bcom trndy for popl to dvoct stripping books of dilogu tgs so tht th prson who is spking is solly pprnt through gsturs nd contxt.

This is ovrkill. Gt bhind m, dilogu tgs, I will dfnd you until th nd!

s long s you minly stick to sid nd skd, your rdr won't notic thy'r thr, nd thy'll b wy bttr bl to trck who is sying wht. Ys, don't ovrdo dilogu tgs nd look for wys to dd mningful gstur nd ction to bck nd forths, but don't throw th bby out with th bthwtr.

Th ky on th gstur nd ction is not to simply us it to brk up th dilogu for pcing purposs, but to ctully mk it mningful, which is hrd to do.

7. Good dilogu is unxpctd.

Thr's nothing wors thn rding strtch of dilogu whr th chrctrs r sying prcisly wht w think thy'r going to sy.

Th bst dilogu countrs our xpcttions nd surpriss us.

"Vldimir Putin!"

Things hppn in thrs. It’s prt of our cultur nd so ingrind in our subconscious tht w notic (if not sk out) pttrns tht fit this rul. It’s lso grt rul for writing, sinc it tps into this undrstood principl nd lts th rdr do hlf th work for us.

Wht is th rul of thr?

It tks thr things to stblish pttrn.

Popl rmmbr things in thrs bttr. (Rlly, thy’v don studis) Think of fmous spchs (Lif, librty, nd th pursuit of hppinss), or clichéd d copy (loction loction loction). vn our storis r brokn down into thr cts. Thr mks popl py ttntion, nd you cn us tht to mk thm py ttntion in your storis.

Using th Rul of Thr

Thr r svrl wys to us thrs in your storis.

1. To build tnsion or forshdow

stblishing pttrns is grt forshdowing tchniqu. Tnsion builds whn rdrs r xpcting somthing nd witing grly for it to hppn.

Tht th first tim somon ss somthing thy mrly s it.

Th scond tim thy notic it, bcus it stnds out now.

Th third tim, thy'r looking for it bcus you'v stblishd pttrn.

This cn hppn ovr th cours of on scn or th whol book. brif glimps of somthing tht sms unimportnt, but it's sn gin ltr with littl mor importnc, nd finlly rvld in biggr wy. It's th crk in th night, followd by th thump, followd by th guy in th ski msk jumping out t you.

2. To mk rdrs rmmbr

Things mntiond thr tims gt rmmbrd. This cn b tricky sinc rpting yourslf cn b bd, so mk sur to slip it in whr it fls nturl. Your protgonist simply sying th sm thing gin stnds out (but not in th good wy). But th protgonist going ovr th pln, forgtting on thing, hving frind rmind thm, fls mor nturl. It lso drws ttntion to tht scond thing, thus mking th rdr notic it vn mor. Thn ltr whn your protgonist is ctivly bout to do tht thing, thy might think bout it on lst tim bcus tht's wht's vitl. (This is good wy to kp th stks, gols, nd motivtions in your rdr's mind)

3. To surpris

Pttrns tht don't go whr w xpct thm to surpris us. This is th wy mny joks work: thy st up pttrn, thn throw somthing unxpctd in for th third itm nd shock us.

How do you gt to my plc? Go down to th cornr, turn lft, nd gt lost.

You cn ld rdrs in on dirction, thn hit thm sidwys, b it with humor, drm, or vn pthos. It works on lrgr scl with scns, nd dosn't hv to b singl lin. Two scns st up th pttrn, thn third strts off to stisfy tht pttrn, thn whm! Chngs dirction nd offrs surpris.

Thr rlly is mgic numbr. It works on lin by lin bsis or in mcro structur formt. It llows for lovly sntnc rhythm, mmorbl pros, nd wy to dd lyrs to flt scns. Nxt tim you’r stuck in scn, try looking t wht pttrns you’v crtd nd how you cn us thos to gt th story moving gin. Or just mk it bttr ovrll.

Nms r idntifirs. W'r clld John nd Jn to tll us prt. Still, w'r still rducd to sying, Jim, th guy who fixs our cr, not Jim who's in Sls or hving to sy John th guy I golf with, not Jon my brothr. If it's confusing in rl lif, how much mor confusing is it going to b in your novl if you don't idntify your chrctrs clrly?

You'd think uthors would nturlly b wr tht similr nms might confus thir rdrs. Not so: I rd novl whr th uthor gv m Jnny, Jny nd Jnin. I kpt brking wy to rmind myslf who ws who. nd rdr who pulls wy from story is bd nws for th uthor, who ought to wnt to kp th rdr grippd. Tht's why you should tk cr to hv th nms you choos look nd sound diffrnt from ch othr. Jnny, Jny nd Jnin look too much lik. So do Frd, Td, nd Jd. Think bout how vry nm will look on th pg. Wht will it look lik if Johnny nd Ronny nd Tommy nd Bonni r sitting round th dinnr tbl? It will look lik th uthor nds to rd this rticl.

Nms tht look too much lik lso tnd sound too much lik, so thos rdrs who 'hr' words will b doubly irrittd. For instnc, nn nd Ptty nd Jnt ll shr vowl. This mks thm flt nd rptitiv, too much lik shp bing through th novl. To crt txtur, contrst your sounds. For instnc, if you hv fw nms with " sounds, lik nn nd Ptty, crt contrst with som closd 'i' nd 'oo' sounds: Lucy or Kim or Tootsi. Look t ll your nms to s if you'v lft out ny vowls you could usfully dd to th spctrum. If you hv Ptty, n lln, Kim, vn n unic, but no nm tht contins brod 'o', why not nm your nxt chrctr Toby, Job, or Lorn? By doing so, you'll b giving this nd th othr chrctrs strong idntity. No rdr is going to confus Kim nd Lorn.

It's not just th look nd sound of th nms you hv to considr, but lso thir rhythms. You could nm your chrctrs Td, John, Frnk, Jn, nd nn, but w would strt fling lik w wr bing hit ovr th hd with hmmr.

"Whr?" skd Td.

"Tht wy," sid John.

"Why?" skd Frnk.

"Bcus," sid Jn.

"Rlly?" skd nn.

"Ys," sid Td.

By choosing instd Td, Frncis, Jonthn, Jn nd nn, you will instntly b bl to construct mor fluid, musicl pros:

"Whr?" skd Td.

"Tht wy," sid Jonthn.

"Why?" skd Frncis.

"Bcus," sid Jn.

"Rlly?" skd nn.

"Ys," sid Td.

Sinc your rdrs r going to s ths nms ovr nd ovr through your book, mk sur it's plsnt xprinc.

Nms com with psychologicl bggg. W rct diffrntly to Hpzibh nd Kt, s do w to Jk nd rmnd. W cn't hlp hving opinions bout nms. W probbly hv n instnt mntl img of Shri-Lynn, not to mntion Chudligh. If you nm chrctr cross th grin of wht w xpct, you 'd bttr hv good rson for doing so. W ll know tht boy nmd Su is going to hv rough lif, so if you hv chrctr with nm tht should giv thm grif nd it dosn't, lik Hpzibh, w'll wondr whr your undrstnding of humn ntur hs gon. girl clld Hpzibh might wll ht hr prnts. girl clld Kt probbly won't. gin, if Hpzibh is chrldr nd Kt is gypsy, w'll wondr whr your common sns hs gon: ths nms just rn't "right" for th popl thy r ttchd to.

W oftn ssum, rightly or wrongly, tht nms tll us somthing bout thir brrs. If you wnt to portry chrming, sunny, ordinry girl, you won't cll hr Protsi. If you wnt to convy tht your ml protgonist is 'll mn', you won't cll him lgrnon. If chrctr is plin-spokn, giv hr plin nm:

Pm, Jon. If your ml chrctr is swt nd shy, w'll b mor comfortbl with Timothy thn with Stv, nd so will h. Brth tlls us somthing bout n oldr womn's bckground nd socil clss. Whn sh clls hr dughtr Lvndr, w know lot mor bout hr t onc.

Unfmilir nms should only b usd whn thr's somthing diffrnt bout th chrctr nd/or hr bckground. Ordinry popl tnd not to giv thir childrn ccntric nms lik Moon Unit. Th mn who rplcs your hot wtr tnk might b clld Jrry or Dnil, but you'd b surprisd if h wr clld Blnkinshop or Gwilim. You'd wnt to know why; thr must story bhind it. In your novl, thr'd bttr b, or why did you giv him tht nm in th first plc? If you don't ctully wnt to crt tht complxity, don't giv him n unusul nm. Thr's no point. Only bginnrs think tht chrctrs bcom mor complx nd intrsting if thy'r givn intrsting nms. Unusul nms hv to hv complling rsons for xisting. If you wnt your chrctrs to b xtrordinry, don't giv thm xtrordinry nms, mk thm do xtrordinry things. Cll your girl scout ldr Sndy, not lxndrin. If sh dcids to cll hrslf lxndrin, w will know somthing (intrsting) bout hr. If you dcid to cll hr lxndrin for no pprnt rson, w'll know somthing (unflttring) bout you.

If you'r writing historicl fiction, your nms should b historiclly ccurt. You won't find Cindy in ny 16th cntury documnt, but you might find womn clld Gils or mn clld nn (.g. th fmous Frnch soldir). Nms hv thir fshions. If you'r stting story bfor th prsnt dy, you should mk it your businss to know wht ws in vogu nd wht ws not. Whn wr Btty nd Grtrud populr nd whn did thy fll from fvour? Whn did rthur nd Hrbrt lv th Top 40, whn did Jk nd Dnil ntr it? If you hv chrctr in th 1880s with 1990s nm, it will look s if you don't know wht you'r doing–nd you don't.

In th sm wy, communitis nd groups hv spcil nms tht you must b wr of if you r not prt of thos communitis (nd crtinly if you r). fricn mricns, for instnc, fvour both trditionl nms, such s Wshington, Willim nd lic, nd lso nwly-crtd ons, such s DVin nd fricn ons, such s Kshl. Thy r fully wr of th significnc of ths nms, nd so should you b, spcilly if you r not mmbr of tht community. Chins mricns nd Jwish mricns somtims sk trnsltions or similr vrsions of thir Chins or Hbrw nms. n Itlin-mricn, bptisd Giovnni, clling himslf Giovnni mns on thing, clling himslf Johnny mns quit nothr.

Nms thmslvs hv intrinsic mnings. Mrgrt mns 'prl', Stphn mns 'crown'. Th rdr dosn't hv to know th mning, nor do you, but if you lrn thos mnings, you cn subtly nrich your story by choosing nms tht r commntry or scrt clu to th ction. For instnc, in my first novl I hv womn clld Pscl, th fminisd Frnch word for str. In th novl sh rdms svrl othr chrctrs. Nobody nds to know this to undrstnd th story, but it's stisfying bit of undr-story tht will pls thos rdrs who know wht "pscl" mns. It undrlins th thm.

Onc you r liv to th rich complxity nd subtlty of nms, you cn us thm to dd lyrs of mning. My xmpl of 'Pscl' is on wy. Thr r othr wys, such contrsting nms, choing nms, nd chnging nms.

Contrsting is just tht, using nms with diffrnt looks, sounds, nd 'fls', such s Brth nd Lvndr, or Jk nd Fontlroy, to ngndr crtin motions in th rdr. W'll dislik on nd lik th othr, fl comfortbl with on nd uncomfortbl with th othr. Lt th nms you choos do som of th work for you. You'r lrdy t first bs if you giv your strightforwrd guy 'Jk' nd your stuck-up snob 'Fontlroy." You cn contrst chrctrs not only ginst ch othr (w'll lik Lvndr, w won't lik Brth) but ginst us: if Slwyn nd Mik r both undr suspicion in murdr mystry, who r w going to suspct? W cn bliv tht Slwyn is crpy, but it will tk us longr to distrust Mik.

choing nms is to us two similr nms, Mg nd Mggi for instnc, or Jny nd Jnny, or Tim nd Tom, to suggst tht ths two chrctrs hv connction of som sort. Prhps Mg is th dughtr Mggi gv up for doption, prhps Jny is crpy psychopth who wnts to bsorb Jnny's idntity, prhps Tim nd Tom r boyhood frinds who lov th fct tht thy lmost shr nm.

Chnging nms cn indict chngs insid chrctr. plin-spokn womn clld Pml would prfr th nicknm Pm. Or Jimmy, wnting to b tkn sriously, strts using Jim or Jms. Tht crpy psychopth strts out s Jon, thn, ftr sh mts Jnny, sh chngs it first to Jn, thn Jny. Tim nd Tom might hv bn boyhood frinds, but s thy grow up Tim wnts his own idntity, wnts to brk fr of old pttrns nd hbits. H insists on bing clld Timothy. Tom is hurt, nd th story bgins.

Nms r powrful tools. Us thm corrctly, nd thy'll invisibly support your story, nhncing nd undrlining your nrrtiv. Of cours, if you wnt your rdrs to lugh, gt Johnny, Ronny, Tommy nd Bonni round tht dinnr tbl...

Forty-fiv mor flws tht xpos your lck of storytlling xprinc, prt 1

rooki mistk

So th othr dy, somon twtd this post from storyfix.com contining fiv writing mistks tht, s thy put it (nd ht-tip to thm for th titl of this post), "xpos your lck of storytlling xprinc."

I rtwtd th link, dding tht th rl numbr ws probbly mor lik 50 thn 5. Twittr popl bing who thy r, now I'm on th hook for th othr 45. Th problm is, if I put 45 flws in on blog post, it's going to b 10,000 words long by th tim I'm don nd nobody's going to rd tht. Clvr, thos Storyfix folks, limiting thmslvs to fiv. Snky bstrds. So I'm going to split it up into fiv posts of nin ch. Hr's th first btch:

1. dvrb nd djctiv bus. lso known s "purpl pros," this is whn writr lvs no vrb or noun undornd with colorful, oh-so-hlpful modifir. Not. Rooki writrs think thy r providing rdrs with concrt dtils tht hlp thm visuliz th scn, but wht's rlly hppning is tht you'r crmming rdr's prfctly cpbl imgintions with uslss dtils tht don't contribut to th story. If th color of th couch dosn't mttr to nything (nd com on, how oftn dos it mttr?) lv it out. Find blnc btwn providing vry fw, crfully slctd dscriptiv modifirs, but for vrything ls, lv it plin. Rdrs will fill in thir own dtils.

2. Unhlping vrbs. You rmmbr bck in grmmr school, thy tught you bout so-clld "hlping vrbs," ons tht "hlp" you crt som of nglish's mor broqu vrb tnss? Stuff lik "will hv bn ting" nd so forth? Sur, prfix lik "will hv bn" dos in crtin pdntic sns hlp to giv nunc to whtvr th cor vrb is (t), but I'll tll you this for fr: it dosn't hlp your story. Rrly is it th cs tht novl rquirs th fin grdtions of vrb tnss tht nglish provids. void ths. ll thy do is cluttr up th nrrtiv with words tht don't crry thir wight. Find wys to r-writ down to th "big thr" vrb

tnss of pst, prsnt, nd futur. Lt rdrs focus on mor intrsting vrbs, lik “t” thn comprtivly boring vrbs lik “will.”

3. Wk vrbs. nothr rooki vrb mistk is to rch for th most gnric vrb tht covrs th ction thy hv in mind, rthr thn th most spcific. This is n r whr writrs of nglish, hving ccss to th lrgst vocbulry of ny lngug on th plnt, hv n dg. nglish hs stoln so much vocbulry from othr lngugs tht w oftn hv dozns (if not hundrds) of vrbs tht rlt to th ction w’r trying to convy. Ths vrbs form fmily trs, s it wr, with th ovrrching, non-spcific mmbrs t th root nd th mor spcific mmbrs t th brnchs. Tk vrbs of motion: run, wlk, fly, fll, sprint, suntr, skdddl, driv, nd mny mor. Ths ll fll undr th prnt-vrb “go.” Th rooki mistk is to rch for th prnt vrb first, rthr thn rching for on of th mor highly-volvd nd usful child vrbs. Thn, finding tht prnt vrb is wk nd lcks nrrtiv joy, th rooki writr doctors it up with som dvrb bus in n ttmpt to fix th problm. Wrong strtgy. Find mor spcific vrb to bgin with. Don’t just tll us somon “wnt” somwhr (pst tns of “go"). Ywn. Pick vrb tht, in singl word, convys th ovrll sns of “going” plus th mnnr in which th going tks plc. Giv us “sprintd” instd, which is lik “go” + “run” + “rlly fst” ll in on word!

4. Pronoun mbiguity. W’v ll xprincd this, both in rding nd in our own writing. This is whn sntnc bcoms muddld up in confusion of pronouns, such tht it is hrd to tll which chrctr prticulr “sh” or “his” or whtvr ctully rfrs to. Th rooki writr dosn’t vn notic this problm, bcus in thir own mind, th writr knows prfctly wll wht sh mns nd xpcts vryon ls to s wll. Sorry, w’r not mind rdrs. Us nm hr nd thr, r-structur th sntnc to void using so mny pronouns. Split up th sntnc into multipl, simplr sntncs. Thr r mny wys to tckl this problm, but don’t mk us guss who’s who in th story.

5. Ovr-dscription of clothing. Storyfix pickd on ovr-dscription of food s on of thir fiv. To tht, I would dd clothing. Or rlly, ovr-dscription of nything, but th prticulr ctgory of ovr-dscribd thing I s most oftn is clothing. Historicl novlists r notorious for this. Ys, if you’r stging movi st in historicl priod, you must py disproportiont ttntion to th dtils of vryon’s costums. In novl, not so much. Just lik with purpl pros, rdrs hv prfctly good imgintions nd will fill in ll ths dtils for you, if only you will lt thm. You only nd to giv thm th br

minimum to gt thm strtd. You nd not dscrib th cut, color, nd mtril of vry itm of clothing on vry chrctr's body.

6. Continuity rrors. This is simply whn story fils to b consistnt with itslf, in trms of somthing tht is unlikly to hv chngd by itslf whn w wrn't looking. If chrctr is short-hird in th morning, it is unlikly tht sh would somhow bcom long-hird by th vning of tht sm dy. Not unlss sh put on wig or got hir xtnsions, which if tht's wht hppnd, w s rdrs likly hv th right to know bout. So if you didn't tll us, oops. But if you did this, mor likly you'r just rooki writr who wsn't pying nough ttntion to your own story. Wll, this is wht rdrs will think, nywy. nd ys, I know it's hrd to s this stuff in our own writing, bcus w gt so clos to th mtril. Which is xctly why bt rdrs r so hlpful, nd why you should spcificlly sk (bg) thm to flg ny such continuity rrors for you.

7. Missplling chrctr nms. s sub-ctgory of continuity rrors, you'd b shockd how oftn I ctch uthors chnging th splling of chrctr's nm mid-story. nd not just minor chrctrs or bit plyrs, ithr. Protgonists! For th lov of Buddh, t lst know your min chrctr's nm! nough sid.

8. Bthroom mirror dscriptions. Writrs of first-prson mtril fc th qustion "how do I convy th viwpoint chrctr's physicl dscription to th rdr?" Rooki writrs put th chrctr in front of bthroom mirror, nd spnd hlf pg ltting th chrctr indulg in chcking thmslvs out. Y. . W. N. lso, mssiv cliché lrt! Tht bit bout ovr-dscribing, bck in numbr 5? Tht pplis to chrctrs too. Sriously, w rrly nd th dtils of physicl dscription. Th brod outlins, ys. It's hlpful to know if your chrctr is skinny s ril or built lik rfrigrtor, bcus tht hlps us know wht th chrctr will nd won't b physiclly cpbl of doing. But th rst? Window drssing. Lt us imgin it for ourslvs. Hr's ll you rlly nd to convy: gnrl g, ovrll thnicity (which you cn do with wll-chosn nm, mny tims), gndr, nd physicl build. Thos r th ssntils. Lv out nything ls tht dosn't ffct th story. Lt rdrs fill in th non-ssntil dtils with thir own imgintions. nd not, rookis, you do not vn hv to giv ll ths ssntils t th sm tim. You cn dol thm out, on t tim ovr th first coupl of chptrs of th book. In th rly chptrs, rdrs r still opn to r-dfining thir mntl img with nw informtion. It's lik ic crm. Lt us hv on lick t tim, rthr thn trying to mk us swllow th whol con in on gulp.

9. Wkup introductions. lso high on th rooki lrt! cliché list r opning scns tht involv chrctr wking up nd going bout his/hr morning routin. Tht dscription lon should tip you off to th problm: routin. Routin is boring. Unlss sombody's going to brk into your protgonist's hous whil sh's nkd, tking hr morning tinkl bfor stpping into th showr, don't opn with wking up. It's boring.

Ok. Tht's it for now. Lv your own pt-pv rooki mistks in th commnts, nd I'll s you nxt tim with th nxt nin!

nothr rooki mistk

This is prt 2 in sris of 45 common writing mistks which mrk writr s rooki. If you missd it, hr's prt 1. Prt 1 covrd th first 9 mistks. Without furthr do, hr r mistks 10 through 18:

10. Simpl mchnics. I don't know why I didn't think of this s th vry first itm for prt 1. Myb bcus it ought to go without sying. But, from wht I s in lot of mnuscripts, it dos not in fct go without sying. So I'll sy it. Mk sur your mnuscript is fr from rrors in th simpl mchnics of splling, grmmr, prgrph formtting, dilogu formtting, nd so forth. spcilly dilogu formtting. Myb I'v just hd run of typicl mnuscripts ltly, but I'v bn rlly struck by how oftn writrs gt this wrong.

Sriously, popl. You ll lrnd this in grmmr school (or should hv), nd thr is crtinly no shortg of rfrnc works for you to turn to if you cn't rmmbr how to do it. Chck out Strunk & Whit's lmnts of Styl if you nd rfrshr. nd don't giv m, "but, Cormc McCrthy dos it" s dfns.) you'r not him, B) h shouldn't ithr. Nor should Chrli Huston, or ny of smll cdr of writrs who hv writtn othrwis vry fin books but whos publishrs, for rsons tht r uttrly mystrious to m, lt thm gt wy with tht shit. Why, guys? Why? Wht possibl vlu is thr in mking it hrdr for rdrs to trck your dilogu? In Chrli Huston's cs, it's spcilly trgic bcus th dilogu itslf if xcllnt. shm, thn, tht I somtims couldn't dciphr who ws sying wht in this brillint, drkly funny novl.

11. Dilogu tgging. Don't confus this on with dilogu ttribution. ttribution is simply whn you lt us know who's sying lin of dilogu by dding littl "Jn sid" or "Kumr skd" bfor or ftr th dilogu. Dilogu tgging coms in two forms. On is whn you dorn th ttribution with n dvrb or dvrbil phrs which ttmpts to tll us th mnnr in which chrctr dlivrd lin of dilogu. For xmpl:

"How cn tht b?" Jn skd disblivingly.
Th scond is whn you us n prticulrly dcortiv vrb to indict spch, th vrb bing chosn to chiv th sm rsult s if you'd usd n dvrb. For xmpl:

"Oh, surly h would nvr do tht," Kumr jokd.

This is on cs whr good prctic dos go ginst th "strong vrbs" rul I gv in prt 1. Th rson, in "Show, don't tll" prlnc, is tht dilogu tgging is form of tlling, whn you should ctully b showing. Bsiclly, if you'r doing good job of showing in your writing, thn th words of th dilogu plus th contxt in which thy ppr is nough to lt th rdr figur out how th lin ws dlivrd. In this scond xmpl, it should b obvious from contxt tht Kumr is joking, vn if you only ttribut th lin with "Kumr sid." S Stphn King's On Writing for th hrd-linr stnc on this issu, xplind in grt dtil.

12. xclmtion mrks in nrrtiv. Willim Mxwll onc sid somthing clos to this: "I bliv tht vry writr should b limitd to on, or prhps two, xclmtion mrks pr crr." (Not: if you hv cittion for th ctul quot, pls post it in th commnts nd I'll updt this.) Now, I'm not quit s hrd-cor s Mxwll bout it, but I do tk his point. Whn usd VRY, VRY SPRINGLY, I bliv thr r lgitimt css whr n xclmtion mrk cn b usful in dilogu. But in nrrtiv, Mxwll is bsolutly right. xclmtion mrks r supposd to b sign of xcitmnt. Whr th rooki writr gos wrong is in thinking tht xclmtion mrks cus xcitmnt. Thy don't. You cnnot slp n xclmtion mrk on dull sntnc nd hv it mgiclly trnsform into n xciting sntnc. Dosn't work. Wors, rdrs s through tht in hrtbt. It's lik you'r bgging us to b xcitd to rd somthing tht you yourslf know isn't ctully xciting. Don't bg. Rvis until it is xciting.

13. Omni-viwpoint syndrom. Writrs ncssrily nd to know vrything bout wht's hppning in thir storis. W nd to know wht vry chrctr is doing, ll th tim, why thy'r doing it, wht thy wnt, why thy wnt wht thy wnt, t ctr. To gt th story right, w must go dply insid th hds of ll th chrctrs in th book. Whr th rooki writr rrs is in thinking tht rdrs must go thr too. W don't. W nd th viwpoints of your protgonists, sur, nd myb your ntgonists, too. But tht's it.

W crtinly don't nd th viwpoint of th milmn who is dlivring pic of vry bd nws to your protgonist nd wishs h could quit his job nd pursu his lov of Jzz improv, but kps dlivring th mil bcus h nds th hlth insurnc covrg for his invlid son's condition. W don't nd th viwpoint of th night-dsk clrk t th hotl whr your on-th-run protgonists r crshing for th night, who is working just on of his thr jobs so h cn put his kid-sistr through collg. W only cr bout th principl plyrs. Lt th rst go.

14. Bckstory flshbcks. Ok, so you'v cut th svntn xtrnous viwpoints out of your novl, nd you'r down to just th rmining cntrl chrctrs. Grt. But how,thn, do you lt th rdr know wht mks ths chrctrs tick? Too oftn, I s rooki mnuscripts whr th on-siz-fits-ll nswr to this qustion is "us flshbcks tht rvl th chrctr's bckstory." This is rltd to th prvious itm in nothr wy s wll. Myb it is gnuinly importnt for us to know bout th tim th protgonist pd his pnts in th middl of th svnth-grd cftri. Ok, fin. But do w hv to s tht in fully-rndrd flshbck scn? Or is it only importnt tht w b md wr tht th vnt hppnd, wht triggrd it, nd how it md th chrctr fl?

Th problm with th flshbck is two-fold. On, it brings th forwrd momntum of th story to hlt. By dfinition, flshbck intrrupts th norml flow of tim in your story. It's lik sying to th rdr "ok, now pus right hr for fw minuts whil w xplor somthing tht hppnd to this guy twnty yrs go." Pus bing th oprtiv word thr. Flshbcks hv this nsty tndncy to kill story's pcing. Two, nd rprising thm you my hv noticd from prt 1 of this sris, by showing fully rndrd scn you r lving lss to th rdr's imgintion. Instd, why not prsnt th informtion in th story's prsnt? Prhps during convrstion with nothr chrctr. Prhps through crfully wordd bit of nrrtiv. But think rlly hrd bfor you intrrupt th min flow of your story for bckstory flshbck. Whtvr's in tht flshbck hd bttr b rlly good to justify it.

15. Flshbck within flshbck. Don’t. Just... don’t, ok? ll tht shows th rdr is tht you couldn’t, or didn’t bothr, to figur out snsibl ordr in which to convy things to us.

16. Bckstory infodumps. Clos on th hls of th bckstory flshbck is th bckstory infodump. It’s th sm thing, xcpt tht instd of intrrupting th forwrd flow of th story with n ctul scn, you intrrupt it with dry, xpository, nd oftn lngthy block of nrrtiv which xplins wht hppnd in th pst. Which is why I wrot “ crfully wordd bit of nrrtiv” bfor. Whn it coms to bckstory, most of it isn’t ctully ncssry t ll. Tht’s on thing. But vn for th prts tht r, w rrly nd it ll t onc. Don’t mk us try to ssimilt chrctr’s whol lif story in hlf pg of nrrtiv. Dol out th juicy bits, on t tim, t momnts whr thy r most rlvnt to th story nd thus hv th most impct.

17. Slf-plgirism. dd-givwy rooki mistk is whn writr unconsciously r-uss th sm words, phrss, nrrtiv tchniqus, nd plot dvics. t bst, it mks for rptitiv, dull writing. t worst, it cn crt n incrdibly distrcting, nnoying ffct for th rdr. Whn w strt to notic th rptition, vry subsqunt instnc nds up jumping out t us vn mor. ll it dos is focus our ttntion on th writing (nd not in good wy), rthr thn on th story. Rcntly, I wrot whol rticl on this mistk for th #mwriting blog, hr.

18. Cliché writing. h, th hcknyd us of crworn phrss, nd tru stndrd for rooki writrs. Thr is on sns in which th us of clichés is good sign. In vry rt form I cn think of, writing includd, w lrn first by imitting. Only thn do w stp out nd innovt. Musicins lrn by plying music composd by othr (mor xprincd) musicins. Nobody picks up guitr, lrns to ply it solly by r without xposur to ny othr music, nd thn strts turning out chrt-topping hits. Pintrs spnd tim in rt school xplicitly multing th Old Mstrs, lrning how to do still lifs, t ctr. Only ftr tht do musicins nd pintrs brnch out to dvlop thir own styl.

It’s th sm with writrs. So whil it’s prfctly nturl for rooki writr to rly on cliché—such s dscribing dim-wittd chrctr s “not th shrpst tck in th box"—w’r still going to cll you on it bcus it’s sign tht you still hv work to do. You hvn’t grdutd yt to th lvl of dvloping your own styl. But kp going. To (hm) borrow cliché, th surst wy to fil is to quit.

Got fvorit rooki mistk of your own? Shr it in th commnts.

So I’v just unsnrld myslf from vicious plot-block. I knw th bons wr thr; I ws missing somthing. In th nd, I ndd to follow my own dvic (gin), strip bck th mny ids I’d grown to lov to rvl cor truth, thn strt brinstorming frsh from tht point. Finlly, succss. For now. I’v lrnd tht my wip is going to b full of ths fits nd strts, ths momnts of inspirtion followd by prspirtion whn somthing just isn’t working s plnnd.

I don’t know bout you, but whn I’m stuck–rlly stuck–I just cn’t gt much ccomplishd in front of my computr. I nd Thinking Spcs. Hr r fw of my fvorit pprochs:

* Stl from th sndmn. It’s lt. Th lights r off, my spous is snoring lightly, my dog is sprwld on th bd, nd my mind is dull blur. I’m on th dg of slp. Dosn’t sm lik sitution conduciv for id-gnrting on th surfc of things, but it oftn is. Somthing hppns to th brin right bfor slp–it’s physicl, it’s chmicl, nd it’s brrir-rducing, llowing you ccss to unboxd thoughts you my not hv during wking hours. (vn scintists hv noticd th bfor-slp-crtivity phnomnon.) Tht’s why I kp nightwritr pn nd notbook on my bdsid tbl, nd oftn go to bd with story qustion in mind.

* Zn. ny chng of scnry is good for m whn I’m stuck. I hv to gt up, lv my computr or lptop, nd b lswhr. Ltly, I’v tkn to lying down on th couch or floor with my SONY IC Rcordr in hnd nd my ys clsd. Th ids com fst nd furious, nd bcus thy’r going stright into th rcordr, I don’t stop to nlyz my thoughts. This mks it sir to follow th pth of stry id to its ndpoint nd lrn mor quickly if it hs mrit.

* Tk thinking showr. Th hot wtr? Th stmy ir? momnt of solitry rlxtion? I don’t know wht it is bout showr tht ncourgs strm-of-consciousnss brinstorming sssion, but it’s on of th most ffctiv wys I know of to dl with tngld bit of story.

* Work out. I cn’t sy I lov my trdmill, but I us it nywy–nd I’v dfinitly noticd tht doing so prks m up in th middl of th dy. My mom clld rcntly to rport nw study: Swinging your

rms whil wlking nhncs crtivity. I couldn’t find tht prticulr rport, but th link btwn xrcis nd crtivity hs bn studid for whil now. It’s nothr sitution in which mini rcordr would com in hndy.

* Pck suitcs. I wnt on writr’s rtrt in Jnury (s “ny chng of scnry is good for m” point bov). I hd vry productiv tim, writing nw scns nd outlining othrs. Of cours it’s good id to brk wy from routin on occsion, shut down th tchnologicl dvics s much s possibl, nd b lon with your thoughts. Though I did work on my lptop during th dy, th vning hours found m with Molskin notbook nd pncil; thy wr vn my dining compnions. nd I hv to sy, thr’s just somthing bout Molskin–spcilly whn ccompnid by chocolt mouss.

Hr in no prticulr ordr, r th tn bst writing tips I'v discovrd in 25 yrs of writing. Thy my work for you, too. Try thm.

Tip On: Py ttntion to imgs
Your right brin thinks in imgs, nd whn you writ, you trnslt imgs from your right brin into words. Usully this procss hppns so quickly tht you'r unwr of it. If you cn mk this procss conscious, you cn goos up your own crtivity. Stphn King clls this procss "writing with th third y --- th y of imgintion nd mmory."

To gt th hng of this, try Jn Houston's procss, dptd from hr book, *Th Possibl Humn*.

Tip Two: Mking mud/ lying trck
Your first drft of ny pic of work is "mud" --- rw mtril. Juli Cmron rfrs to your first drft s "lying trck", nothr trm I lik.

If th first drft's wful, grt! It's mnt to b. It's only rw mtril. Howvr, if you don't crt th first drft, or you wit until you hv rlly grt id tht's worth first drft, you won't writ nything. Writ. Mk mud.

Tip Thr: Just writ --- think on th pg, or on th scrn, NOT in your hd

Thinking too much whil you writ is trchrous, bcus you cn spnd two hours "writing" nd nd up with hlf pg of work. Writ-think. Tht is, think on th pg, not in your hd.

Tip Four: Grow your writing with lists
Listing is form of brinstorming. It grows your writing, nd it's fun.

Listing is n xcllnt tchniqu to us whn you gt stuck in your writing, nd it dosn't mttr wht kind of writing you'r doing, whthr it's fiction or nonfiction. Listing lso hlps you in th rvision procss, to dd txtur to your work.

Hr's n xcllnt FR softwr progrm to hlp you to produc lists, nd to sv thm.

Tip Fiv: Us your mgicl thsurus
Your most usful listing tool is ---- thsurus. Kp on on your dsk to kickstrt your brin.

Your thsurus nd dictionry r prfct kickstrtrs. Thy'r lso vitl tools whnvr you'r rvising.

Tip Six: Mk writing th FIRST thing you do ch dy
If you writ t lst pg, by hnd, s soon s you gt up, you'll find tht writing coms mor sily to you for th rst of th dy. You'r lso mor focusd nd rlxd for th rst of th dy.

Tip Svn: St WIG gols --- th bst gols r lwys unrlistic
Writr Mrth Bck clls unrlistic gols WIGs: Wildly Improbbl Gols. In th Sptmbr 2002 issu of Oprh mgzin sh sys: "... lrning to invit nd ccpt your own WIG cn wkn you to kind of ubiquitous, bnvolnt mgic, rivr of nchntmnt tht prptully flows to your dstiny."

WIG is xciting. Just thinking bout WIG will gt your hrt pounding. Working towrd your WIG (writing book, writing scrnply, gtting signd on s contributor t mss-mrkt mgzin) tks hrd work. Lots of hrd work.

nd t th nd of tht hrd work, s Bck points out, you chiv your gol, but thr's twist. You nvr chiv it xctly s you nvisiond it - you chiv somthing vn bttr, somthing you could nvr hv imgind.

I'm grt blivr in writing BOUT your gols. This is bcus whn you writ, you'r using both sids of your brin, nd r ccssing your unconscious mind s wll. You liv in your lft brin, which you rgrd s "you", but you hv silnt prtnr, your right brin, which is lso you, nd which communicts vi imgs nd flings.

Tip ight: Sprt writing nd diting
Writing coms first, thn diting. If you try to combin th two, you will block.

Writing should com s sily to you s chtting to frind. If it dosn't, you'r trying to dit in your hd bfor you gt th words on ppr, or on th computr scrn. If you'r not wr of th dngr of combining writing nd diting, you'll mk writing hrd for yourslf, whn it should b sy. If you don't hv troubl tlking, how cn you hv troubl writing?

Tip Nin: It's good to struggl with your writing
In his book Th Brkout Principl, Dr Hrbrt Bnson (who lso wrot Th Rlxtion Rspons) dscribs struggl/ rls procss tht lds to nw lvl of wrnss. Whn you struggl, nd thn compltly giv up th struggl --- just giv up --- thr's chnc tht you cn chiv pk xprinc which lds you to nw lvl of functioning.

How dos this work in your writing? Lt's sy tht you'r writing novl. This work is hrd for you. Howvr, you kp t it fithfully, working on your novl ch dy. You struggl with it for wks. Thn you giv up. lthough you kp writing, you sy to yourslf: "I don't cr ny mor wht grbg I writ. I'm just going to do it. I'm just going to writ."

This rls lds to writing mgic. Suddnly you'r inspird, nd you finish th book in rush. lthough you will still occsionlly struggl with your writing (bcus struggl is prt of lif), you'v brokn through to nw lvl of functioning in your work.

This nw lvl would not, nd could not, hv hppnd without th struggl.

Tip Tn: Good writing = truthful writing
Writing truthfully cn fl lik undrssing in public, so mny bginning writrs worry bout shring thir writing.

B compssiont. Firstly, to yourslf. Writ. Writ for yourslf. ll writing tks courg.

Whn you finlly show your writing to othrs, you discovr th mzing truth tht _no on crs_. In hr book "Writing To Sv Your Lif", Michl Wldon dviss: "Gt ovr yourslf". No on is judging wht you writ. So writ.

Th mor I xplor fiction writing, th mor complx nd multi-lyrd it bcoms. Through th procsss of brinstorming, outlining, rsrching, writing, nd rvising, I hv discovrd countlss dtils tht uthors hv to considr s thy st out to produc vibl work of fiction.

Ovr th yrs, I hv collctd vst pil of nots nd ids concrning fiction writing. s I ws going through ths nots, I figurd thy could b compild into mstr list of writing tips tht might hlp writrs tckl novl by offring diffrnt prspctivs nd by providing foddr for th crtiv procss.

Ths fiction writing tips com from countlss sourcs. Som wr pickd up bck in my collg dys. Othrs cm from books bout writing. Mny cm from intrviws with succssful uthors tht I hv rd, wtchd, or listnd to. nd fw cm from my own prsonl xprincs s both rdr nd writr.

Writing novl is n mbitious ndvor, nvr mind diting, publishing, nd mrkting it. Hopfully, th writing tips blow will hlp mk th first prt of your momntous tsk littl sir.

Th writing tips blow focus on th tchnicl nd crtiv writing procss rthr thn th businss nd of things. You cn tk fw of ths writing tips or tk thm ll. nd dd your own fiction writing tips by lving commnt.

Rd mor fiction thn you writ.

Don't lock yourslf into on gnr (in rding or writing). vn if you hv fvorit gnr, stp outsid of it occsionlly so you don't gt too wighd down by trying to fit your work into prticulr ctgory.

Dissct nd nlyz storis you lov from books, movis, nd tlvision to find out wht works in storytlling nd wht dosn't.

Rmmbr th crdnc of ll writrs: butt in chir, hnds on kybord.

Don't writ for th mrkt. Tll th story tht's in your hrt.

You cn mk n outlin bfor, during, or ftr you finish your rough drft. n outlin is not ncssry, nor is it writtn in ston, but it cn provid you with rodmp, nd tht is mighty powrful tool to hv t your disposl.

You don't lwys nd n outlin. Giv discovry writing try.

Som of th bst fiction coms from rl lif. Jot down storis tht intrst you whthr you hr thm from frind or rd thm in nws rticl.

Rl lif is lso grt sourc of inspirtion for chrctrs. Look round t your frinds, fmily, nd coworkrs. Mgnify th strongst spcts of thir prsonlitis nd you'r on your wy to crfting cst of blivbl chrctrs.

Mk your chrctrs rl through dtils. girl who bits hr nils or guy with limp will b fr mor mmorbl thn chrctrs who r prsntd with lngthy hd-to-to physicl dscriptions.

Th most rlistic nd rltbl chrctrs r flwd. Find somthing good bout your villin nd somthing drk in your hro's pst.

void tlling rdrs too much bout th chrctrs. Instd, show th chrctrs' prsonlitis through thir ctions nd intrctions.

Giv your chrctrs difficult obstcls to ovrcom. Mk thm suffr. Tht wy, whn thy triumph, it will b vn mor rwrding.

xplor th humn condition.

Mk sur you undrstnd th thr ct structur. vry story nds bginning, middl, nd n nd.

Mmoriz th Hro's Journy. Us it.

Cultivt distinct voic. Your nrrtor should not sound wrm nd frindly in th first fw chptrs nd thn objctiv nd loof in ltr chptrs. Th voic should b consistnt nd its ton should complmnt th contnt of your book.

Giv crful considrtion to th nrrtiv. Is th story bst told in first prson or third prson? If you'r not sur, writ fw pgs in ch nrrtiv styl to s wht works bst.

Is your story moving too fst for rdrs or r thy ywning through vry prgrph? r th lov scns too short? r th fight scns too long? Do you go into thr pgs of dtil s your chrctrs wlk from point to point B nd thn fly through n ction squnc in coupl of short prgrphs? Py ttntion to pcing!

Infus your story with rich thms to giv it humnistic qulity. xmpls of thms includ scrific, rdmption, rbirth, lif nd dth, fith, dstiny, tc. Ths r th big shdows tht hovr ovr your story. Us symbols nd imgry to crt continuity throughout your story. Think bout how th Whit Rbbit kpt popping up whn lic ws dvnturing in Wondrlnd or how th color rd ws usd in th film mricn Buty. Ths r subtl dtils but thy giv your story grt powr.

vry grt story includs trnsformtion. Th chrctrs chng, th world chngs, nd hopfully, th rdr will chng too.

im for story tht is both surprising nd stisfying. Th only thing wors thn rding novl nd fling lik you know xctly wht's going to hppn is rding novl nd fling unfulfilld t th nd–lik wht hppnd wsn't wht ws supposd to hppn. Your rdrs invst thmslvs in your story. Thy dsrv n motionl nd intllctul pyoff.

Focus on building tnsion, thn giv it snp.

nrich your min plot with subplots. In rl lif, thr's lot hppning t onc. Whil th chrctrs r ll trying to gt rscud from th lins, romncs r brwing, tritors r stwing, nd frindships r forgd. Thr is diffrnc btwn sub-plot nd tngnt. Don't go off on too mny tngnts. It's oky to xplor vrious brnchs of your story whn you'r working through th first or scond drft, but vntully, you hv to pr it down to its cor.

If you writ in gnr, don't b frid to blur th lins. drm cn hv funny momnts nd thrillr cn hv bit of romnc.

Mk sur your stting is vivid nd rlistic vn if you md it up.

If you didn't mk up your stting, thn do your bst to gt to th loction nd s it for yourslf bfor you finish your mnuscript. If tht's not possibl, gt busy rsrching.

Don't undrstimt your rdrs. ssum thy r s smrt (or smrtr) thn you r.

Giv th rdrs room to think. You don't hv to tll your story in minut dtil, including ch minut of th plot's timlin or ll of th chrctrs' thoughts. Provid nough dots, nd trust tht th rdr will hv fun conncting thm.

Lt th rdrs us thir imgintions. Provid fw choic dtils nd lt th rdrs fill in th rst of th cnvs with thir own colors.

Don't focus xclusivly on storytlling t th xpns of crfting complling lngug.

ppl to rdrs' snss. Us dscriptiv words tht ngg th rdrs' snss of tst, touch, nd smll.

pply potry tchniqus to brth lif into your pros. Us llitrtion, onomtopoi, mtphor, nd othr litrry dvics to mk your sntncs sing nd dnc.

Whn rwriting, chck for th following: plot hols, chrctr inconsistncis, missing scns, xtrnous scns, ccurcy in rsrch, nd of cours, grmmr, splling, nd punctution.

s you rvis, sk yourslf whthr vry prgrph, sntnc, nd word is ssntil to your story. If it's not, you know whr th dlt button is.

Proofrd crfully for grmmr, splling, nd punctution. Th fwr typos in your finl drft, th bttr.

Bfor your finl rvisions nd bfor you snd your mnuscript out to ny gnts or ditors, find your bt rdrs: join writing group, tk fiction workshop, or hir pro.

Do not snd out your rough drft. Go through th rvision procss t lst thr tims bfor hnding it out to your bt rdrs. Th strongr it is whn you bring in ditors, th strongr thos ditors will b bl to mk it.

Collct nd us ths nd othr writing tips in fil or in your notbook. Whn somthing bout your story dosn't fl quit right or if you sns thr's somthing missing, your nots nd othr rsourcs might provid you with solution.

Hv fun. If you'r not njoying writing, thn myb it's not for you. If you'r not njoying fiction writing, try somthing ls lik potry, blogging, or scrnwriting. B opn nd you'll find your wy.

Oftn, whn I rd submission from nwr writr or on who hs just com out of fiction clss, I flg it for ovrwriting. Wht is ovrwriting? Bsiclly, it's sns tht th pros (nd th writr bhind it) is trying too hrd to gt thir point cross or imprss th rdr. Somtims I wondr if popl who ovrwrit r trying to liv up to som id of "fiction writr" tht xists in thir hds… scrib who uss $10 words nd milks vry img nd othrwis pcks vry sntnc until it's drgging nd blotd. Thy wnt to

mk sur w gt thy'r rl writr. Somtims this procss is t th front of thir mind, somtims it hppns without thm rlizing.

Hr r th two typs of ovrwriting tht I s th most oftn:

Ovrwrittn Imgs

Lots of ovrwriting livs in th imgs. Writrs oftn s prfct imgs in pros — imgs tht work wll — nd thy try thir hnd t crting somthing comprbl, not knowing tht th ky to most prfct imgs is) simplicity nd b) isoltion. Or thy hr tht imgs r supposd to b n objctiv corrltiv (prlll for motion). Or thy know to lod imgs with mning, so thy do thir bst to crt multipl lyrs with ch dscription. Or thy hr tht words r supposd to b mimtic of th ction thy'r dscribing, so thy rlly bring out th ctiv vrbs. Ths r ll fin instincts nd grt fiction crft tips, but thy could sily go wry. For xmpl:

Cold strlight shttrd cross th inky blck-vlvt xpns of th srching night. Th frozn ir slicd th lst of th wrmth from Cssndr's lungs s sh chokd in sputtring brth.

Wow! Lot's of tnsion thr. ch vrb is rzor-shrp nd nginrd to convy drm: "shttrd," "slicd," nd "chokd." Th strs nd th night sky r hostil ("cold" nd "srching"). Cssndr is obviously in drk nd unfrindly world.

But imgin if vry sntnc ws lik this. Or vry img workd this hrd. It would gt downright xhusting to rd. Which brings m to th nxt sign of ovrwriting…

Hitting th Rdr Ovr th Hd

Simplicity is th nturl opposit of ovrwriting (I'm Tm Simplicity, if nyon is wondring). Just s ovrwrought dscription is common in ovrwriting, it oftn gos hnd in hnd with its sistr troll: hitting th rdr ovr th hd. In th xmpl bov, th world ws hostil nd cold. W got it. Rdundncy is nothr wy tht writr cn hit thir rdr ovr th hd.

This oftn hppns whn th writr thinks of not just on prfct img (thir imgintion is mightir thn tht!) but two or vn thr. Instd of opting for simplicity nd choosing th on prfct img to convy wht thy mn, thy go hd nd crm ll thr in. Lt's go bck to poor Cssndr:

Sh grspd hr clok lik drowning womn grbbing slippry liflin. Hr fingrs scrtchd for th moth-worn fbric but it pulld prt lik gossmr spidrwb. tttrd sm split down Cssndr's sid s sh huggd th cot to hrslf, th nois lik ic crumbling from glcir, nd th gp lt in stb of stl-cold night.

W gt it! It's still cold nd now hr jckt's brokn mss. This writr (m) rlly wntd th rdr to gt Cssndr's dsprtion, so thy introducd us to th img of drowning womn. Nxt, I rlly wntd you to gt tht th cot is insubstntil…cu spidrwb mtphor. Thn, just for fun, I lovd th nois of ic sprting from th glcir nd I wntd to toss it on th hp (plus, this rinforcs tht — nws flsh — it's rlly cold out thr…gnius!).

On of ths imgs would'v bn fin. Two is pushing it. Thr, nd thn ll th xtr cold imgry hpd on top? Tht's too much. Pick on img nd mk it do th work instd of piling on vry singl thing you cn think of. If you'll notic, ovrwriting stops ction. W'v hd fiv sntncs nd only two (mor lik on nd hlf) pics of informtion: it's cold, nd Cssndr's jckt isn't grt, which rlts bck to th cold.

Th rgumnt for Simplicity

Writrs oftn gt bord with th simpl. grt xmpl is th word "sid." To show off thir chops (nd thir onlin thsurus), thy whip out ll kinds of fncy "sid" synonyms: "chortld," "shrikd," "rgud." Wll, this is n mtur rror bcus "sid" blnds in nd it simply works. It dosn't stop th ction whil th rdr notics wht clvr word you'r using, it kps things flowing. Writrs oftn think thy'r sying somthing too simpl, so thy dcid to jzz it up by going out of thir wy to sy it diffrntly.

This is whr ovrwriting lwys swoops in. I undrstnd it compltly. Writrs r chomping t th bit to writ, to mk up nw img, to rlly gt thir point cross. But somtims th simplst wy of sying somthing — wy tht's still rtful nd xprssiv but lso rstrind — is th bst. Whn you'r trying to show off in th pros, you los sight of your rl purpos: to tll tl. Whn you'r trying to b undrstood through multipl imgs nd rptition, you'r not giving your rdr nough crdit. Ovrwriting is ll bout trying too hrd. Simplicity is ll bout ltting th crft nd th story spk for thmslvs.