

BEGIN WRITING FICTION

An e-book for beginners and professionals

How to create powerful characters

Characters make a story what people make the world. They breathe life into an otherwise insipid environment. Powerful characters are always real, sometimes so real that you remember them as real people. How do you create such characters? What qualities should a character possess?

A character should have a history, even though you do not include it in your story.

Where does she study?

What qualities does she possess? Is she shy, naughty, talkative or stubborn?

What dreams does she have?

Where does she live?

What kind of relationship does she share with her parents and siblings?

How does she look as a child?

Develop your character from childhood to adulthood. Even if you don't include every detail in your story, it is important that you know your character inside out. Believe me, it will show in your story. When I spend less time with a character, I am sure people will notice it. What I learnt when I tried to take the short cut is, you can't!

Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Visualize her childhood in your mind. Once you have done that, move ahead and think of her as an adult. She can be anywhere between 18 and 26. The part of her life you are going to include in your story should be analyzed deeply.

How does she look? (Color of her hair, shape of her face, her height, her weight, the clothes she is wearing, color of her eyes)

In which profession is she?

Where does she live?

What qualities does she have? Only pronounced ones. (bold, shy, courageous, ambitious, lazy, complacent, aggressive, optimist, emotional, practical, rude, devoted, envious, fearful, faithful, energetic, talkative, naïve, boastful, gullible, pedantic, extremely decorous, selfish, loner)

Are there any peculiarities in her? (Does she intensely hate injustice? Is she overtly duty-bound? Does she have any dark secrets? Did failure in love change her forever? Does she touch her nose often when speaking to strangers?)

What is her ambition?

What does she intensely love and hate?

How does she carry herself in public?

What are her beliefs?

How would you describe her in one word? (That will be her most prominent characteristic)

Once you have finished interviewing your character, you will be able to see her clearly.

Every character is born out of three sources:

1. From the writer's imagination
2. From real life
3. From a combination of imagination and reality

If you have a fertile imagination, then you can create fantastic characters solely from it. But if what you are good at is observing people, then you can borrow your characters from real life. Maybe Uncle John is so obsessed with time that he even goes to the bathroom by consulting the clock. Find out peculiar personalities who can be turned into wonderful characters. If you can only think of one prominent characteristic in a person, weave a character around it by using your imagination. This is how you can do it.

A jealous girl you know can also be keeping a notebook with the names of all the girls whom she would like to leave behind. Sometimes, she makes maps of their houses, marking out loopholes so that she can steal the things she wants. One night, she even tiptoed out of her house and went to Martha's to see whether they were awake or not. Can she turn into a murderer? Is she suffering from Impulse Control Disorder? The answer is 'yes' if what you want to write is a murder mystery.

Choose your words carefully when you are describing a character. Try to replace generalities into particulars. The above paragraph could have written this way too.

A girl, around 15 years of age, is intensely jealous. Her notebook has names of all those girls she would like to leave behind along with the maps of their houses from where she wants to steal things. One day, she even tiptoed out of her house at night and went to her friend's house to see whether they were awake or not.

The second paragraph does not speak of the character. Instead, it speaks of the notebook, the houses, day, night and maps. If you want to highlight your character, fix the spotlight on her.

Another problem with the second paragraph is that the events are related, not shown. Your reader is screaming, 'I don't want to know, I want to see'. Don't relate events; show them through your character.

To 'show' your character to your readers, the only thing you need is details. That is why knowing your character is so vital.

"I will get out of the car right now if you don't talk to me," she said, her quiet voice quivering with anger.

From this dialogue, you get a sense of tension that the woman is in. You also know the place they are in, i.e. the car. You understand that the woman desperately wants to talk to the other person because she cares for him or her. You also know that she has a quiet voice, which means that she is a sober person. As the 'quiet voice' is put against 'quivering with anger', you can judge that she is restraining herself from demonstrating her emotions.

The mark of a good character is its voice. We are marked by our style. In turn, our style is marked by our preferences. A good character is so distinct in her behavior from other characters, that it becomes her style. The only characters you will remember after years of reading a book are those, which have their own individualistic style. That doesn't mean you have to exaggerate their characteristics. Even a mostly passive character like Jane Eyre is still remembered for her strength in restraining herself. She is remembered because she fought with her desires. Conflict is like stones lying under a river. Without them, the river won't gush furiously, creating sound and excitement for the beholder.

A good character should grow during the story. He should change after his experiences, either for the good or for the bad. Spiderman changed from an immature teenager to a mature and responsible individual. Jane Eyre changed from a rebellious child to a quiet and controlled woman. You must also have changed since you were a kid. Show that change through your story or save it for the end (depending upon the character).

Get a gripping plot

A plot is the Formula 1 racetrack on which you will run your story. While creating the plot on which your story will run, you have to make sure it is as interesting as possible. A gripping beginning, twists, suspense, mystery, surprises, accidents, scheming, are all parts of a good plot. Your plot should have something new to offer. A story without novelty is as boring as a straight road.

Always choose a plot where there is plenty of scope for action. An old man is sitting on his wheelchair, watching television. That is not a charming beginning if you are not going to introduce another character soon. Maybe a thief is trying to get inside the house while the old man is watching T.V. Introduce action or the possibility of action soon after you begin your story. The reader is impatient.

Introduce conflicts

Conflicts create excitement and reveal our characters' personalities. Build up tension by creating conflicts. Conflicts can be of five kinds:

- Between two individuals
- Between an individual and society
- Between an individual and nature
- Between nature and society
- With himself

Weave the conflict into dialogues. That will enlighten the reader about the personality of your character and will also move the plot forward.

In an effort to produce highly dramatic writing, don't forget that it should also be believable. If Susan jumps off her third floor flat one morning, the reader needs to know why. While developing your plot, ask the character, **why**. Why did you try to kill yourself? She might say that she cannot live without her husband who died a week ago. She will give you a reason. Listen to her. Include that detail before or after she jumps off the building. That will make the reader believe in your story.

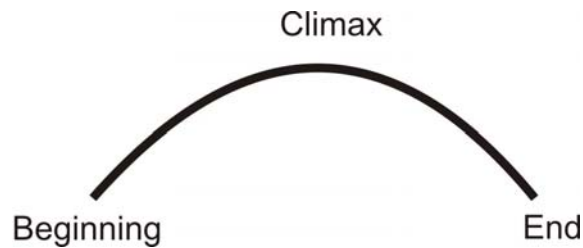
Creativity implies that you maintain a balance between surprise and believability. To do that, surprises (if they come first) should be followed by reason (whys) and visa versa.

While including information about the setting or characters into fiction, don't fall into the trap of providing unnecessary details. Unnecessary details are those, which don't move the plot forward, doesn't help you visualize the setting or tell you something new about the characters. If a passage or a sentence is doing none of these three, cut it out for good.

If your character is overtly religious and decides to become a nun, don't write long paragraphs on her praying or talking about God. Instead, use actions, which show that she is swiftly getting obsessed with religion. She might weather a storm to go to church. She might sharply turn down Bret's proposal for friendship. One fine day, she might throw away all her fancy dresses. These details not only move the plot forward, but also reveal the change in the character. Remember, tightness of plot will keep the readers glued to the story.

The structure of the plot

The clichéd but still largely employed structure of a plot is – the beginning, the climax and the end. Think of it as an arc.



In the beginning, you introduce the environment, the situation in which your characters are. It can be a classroom, a garden, the road, a car, room, office or any place with which you would like to start the story. You describe it through sight, sound, smell and touch.

You also introduce your characters, either through dialogue or narration. Your protagonist should have entered the story by now. He is the main person in your story and it is better that the readers get to know him from the very beginning. He might be alone, conversing with another character or at a party. It is not a good idea to introduce more than three characters in the first few pages. It becomes confusing and diverts the reader's attention from what the author is trying to show. Create the plot in such a way that a character has enough time to imprint his image in the reader's mind.

The beginning of a story should initiate a conflict. Remember the three witches in Macbeth. That scene started the conflict, which took us to the climax (the murder) and the resolution (the suicide of Lady Macbeth and the beheading of Macbeth).

Once you have established your characters, setting and situation, build up tension. Put the characters into situations, which will bring out the conflict. If Julia is torn between staying on with her husband and kids or moving to South Africa for a better career prospect; show that by putting her in situations which show her dilemma. Her husband and kids can throw a surprise party on her birthday even after she has told them that she has decided to go. Plot and character can do wonders for you if you use them in synchrony.

The end means just that. The End. By now, you have resolved the conflict through climax. After all, Julia decides to stay with her husband and kids. That's the end, but you can't leave the climax hanging in the air. You've got to wrap it up. Show what happiness Julia and her family is experiencing after her decision not to go. Maybe her husband can say that he knew all along that she wouldn't go. Maybe she gets another offer of a high profile job in the same city. Just give the readers an idea of what will follow after you close your story. Even in an open ending, there is a hazy clue of what will follow. Readers like uncertainty, but not at the end of the story.

Which comes first? Character or plot

It is like asking: Did the chick come first or the egg? The difficulty is that either can create the other. The same holds true for character and plot. When the characters act, the plot changes, and the plot dictates how the characters should act. Sounds confusing? It is.

The best way to simplify it is to relax the rules. You have jotted down the outline of the plot and the characters. Your characters are Mark, his wife, daughter, prisoners and cops. Mark is the protagonist. It is through his actions that the plot changes.

Mark is running away from the law, as he has been falsely accused of murdering his wife. The cops find him and put him in prison. *He becomes a victim of prison fights, as he refuses to join either gang. The prison life is dragging him into scum. He tries to escape, but fails.*

If you have been showing Mark as a fighter from the very start (like Rocky), then you can't show him trying to escape from the prison. If he is a fighter, he will fight, not escape. On the other hand, if you have shown his sensitive side to the readers (him being a caring husband and father), then he can feel disgusted by the fights and try to escape.

Here, your character is giving shape to the plot. You have to ask yourself. What would a person like him do when faced with such a situation? Don't put yourself in his situation to find the answer. He is entirely different from you and he will not behave as you would have. The story will continue in this way if he is portrayed as a sensitive man.

Seeing no option, he joins one gang and fights. He wins every time. He pleads with the cops to let him go, as there is nobody to take care of his daughter. The cops tell him that if he promises to fight for them and win the world companionship, they may let him go. He practices hard, fights and wins.

Mark is a sensitive man, that's why he pleads with the cops to let him go. If he is a Rocky, then he will dictate, not plead. At worse, he might negotiate. Your plot will go something like this if Mark is all toughness.

The cops put him in prison. He joins a gang and soon becomes their top fighter. Seeing the possibility of profit, the cops take him under their control and force him to fight in championships. He fights for them and wins. Before the final of the world championship, he tells the cops that he wouldn't fight unless they let him go if he wins. Helpless, the cops promise to let him go if he wins. He fights, struggles at first, then fights like a tiger and wins the world championship.

The plot is more or less the same, but the protagonist has changed. The only thing to keep in mind is that the characters and the plot should justify each other.

Find your way to brilliant narration

You have a story in mind and you can visualize the characters in it. Now you have to put your thoughts and images on paper or the word processor. The general belief is that you shouldn't edit your story until you have completed the first draft. I don't follow it. I stop, edit, think about my story whenever I like. The point is: Rules can be broken. Do whatever suits your writing, not you. I hated to edit my 250-page novel five times, but I did it nevertheless, because my book was getting better with every edit. If your writing is gaining nothing out of your rebelliousness, don't do it.

Learn to visualize

As soon as you start putting the first words on paper, you need to **see** what you are writing about. In your mind's eye, include details in your character (if you are writing about him/her at the moment). Close your eyes and try to think of the color of his hair, the structure of his face, his eyes, nose, clothes, weight, height, color of skin, his way of walking and his peculiarities. Once you have his image in mind, you can include those details in your narration. The more details you include in your character, the better will the reader be able to visualize him/her.

Including details

How many details you include in your setting depends on the length of your work. If it's a novel, you need to think of as many details as you can. For a short story, you can describe the setting through dialogues and a short narrative describing the world of the story. That much is enough to show the reader where the characters are. Here is an example from a short story of mine titled 'A Twisted Tale'.

Even the tiniest speck of light was swallowed by the blind night. The forest merged into darkness, fading itself into such a scary black that it didn't make a difference whether you kept your eyes open or closed. The narrow hilly road stretched down the middle of the forest like a surgeon's incision. The wind had now slackened and the forest fell into a deep slumber. If you strained your ears, you could hear the sound of your feet lightly crushing the gravel on the road. When you stopped, the darkness and the silence pulled you inside the dead world. As if to break the stillness, a lone dead leaf hit the ground.

I wanted to create suspense, so I used a forest at night as my setting. I created a narrow hill road twisting its way through the woods. Then I made use of senses. Sound and sight. I made use of the wind, the leaf and footsteps to show how silent the forest is. The night is blind and swallows even the tiniest speck of light. That shows how dark it is. And lastly, I introduced a human touch by showing how **you** would have felt being there. It is important that the reader **feels**, not just reads.

Ask questions. What do I want to show the readers? If your story is an adventure, you might want a small isolated dusty town scarred with murderers. That is the tip of the pyramid. As you go deep into your story, you will need to include more details to make the base solid. If you work hard enough, it will be as strong and majestic as the pyramid.

The setting of your story or the world in which you put your characters should be as vivid as the city in which you live. When imagining your setting, ask yourself. What kinds of trees are there? Is the road narrow or wide? Is the region a desert, hills or plains? Is it a city or a small town? Is the room dark or well lit? What kind of people does one find in this place? What clothes are they wearing? Visualize only those details, which are important to the plot. If you have a small hilly town as your setting, then narrating their culture will distract and bore the reader. It works best to describe the scenery and weave the culture into dialogues.

It is never a good idea to describe characters. Never say: He had brown eyes. Instead, weave that characteristic into a dialogue or show it through another character's eyes.

"You stood me up," he said, his brown eyes burning like embers.

Or

She looked at his eyes. They were brown and intense. He looked like a no-nonsense guy.

Give the reader two or three things to think about instead of just one. He had brown eyes will not only bore him, but will also bring you into focus. Who is telling him that? You. When writing in third person omniscient, you should not come into the picture as far as possible.

Language

Language should be molded according to the genre in which you are writing. A critical reader can differentiate between a literary novel and a murder mystery just by reading the first few paragraphs. That is because the build up is different. In a literary novel, generally there is an action-packed beginning unlike a murder mystery.

In which way should you use language? Let's break the language down and look at the words chosen to describe the atmosphere.

In a mystery, you use words, which show how dark, mysterious and dangerous the place is. **A dark, narrow staircase is twisting up from the corner of the room. There is no sound except that of a creaking old door swaying from the wind. John walks over to the door and shuts it with a loud bang. The furious flutter of the bats strikes through the sullen night like a sword.**

By using and correctly placing words, which give a creepy feeling, you can build up an image of a mysterious place.

When you read a book next time, notice the way the author uses words to create feelings. When tears roll down from your eyes after reading a paragraph, stop and re-read it. How has the author made you cry? What words has he used to make you feel that way? Learn from his experience.

Point of view (POV) will also change the kind of language you use in a story. Here is a paragraph from *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

My first impulse was to get it into my mouth as quickly as possible, but I remembered where I was. I ran home, and on our front porch I examined my loot. The gum looked fresh. I sniffed it and it smelled right. I licked it and waited for a while. When I did not die I crammed it into my mouth: Wrigley's Double-Mint.

This story has been told from the point of view of a child. Notice the way the author has shown us the psychology of a child. There are no difficult words. The action is cut into sentences according to the character's thoughts, and there are no long sentences. The mystery of what he is eating is uncovered **after** the whole experience.

Here are some tips on **what to avoid while writing**:

- Avoid difficult words, which the reader might have difficulty in understanding
- Avoid moralizing
- Don't force your point of view on the readers. In other words, let the characters say what you want to say
- Don't inform, show
- Include the five senses (hear, smell, touch, see, speak) to rouse the reader's emotions
- Avoid unnecessary details
- Be innovative
- Use active tense, not passive
- Read your text aloud and listen for jarring notes

Point of view

Which point of view (POV) should I write in? That is a question most beginners ask themselves just before starting out with fiction writing. Although third person limited is mostly popular among writers, some authors use first person narrative as well. Let's see what these point of views mean and how they affect your writing.

First Person Narrative

In the first person narrative, a character (usually the protagonist) uses his point of view to tell the story. *I ran home to tell Pete about the bullies.* The use of "I" instead of "He" tells us that it is the first person narrative.

Strengths –

First person narrative has immediacy. That is because it is like a conversation between the author and the reader. The distance between the author and the view point (VP) character is not there. The result is that the reader gets more involved in the story.

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago - never mind how long precisely - having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.

The extract has been borrowed from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville

That is how *Moby Dick* begins. Here, the author directly addresses the reader and even tells them that they can call him Ishmael. He retracts the reader's interest by showing his impatience to point out the exact number of years. That gives him a characteristic so that the reader can shape his personality in his mind.

First person narrative gives the story an authenticity, which no other POV gives. The reader readily believes in whatever the VP character is telling him.

If Heath says: *"The captain said it was Chris. I couldn't believe it. I looked at Tom. Only he could have braved the night to get the boat back."*

Now, that is what Heath thinks. The reader doesn't know who got the boat back. Maybe the captain was wrong, maybe Heath is wrong. But when you read the passage for the first time, you believe in what Heath is telling you. Subconsciously you think: He knows Tom. He has been with him for years. He is living that life, he can't be wrong. The reader will believe in what Heath is saying without a question.

Another interesting observation is that the reader sees the captain only through the eyes of Heath. There is no other truth than what Heath is telling you. The world in the book is

his view of the world. If he wears red glasses, the world will be red. The reader can't see a green world when it has been painted red. Naturally, the reader doesn't have a choice but to believe in what the VP character is telling him. You decide whether that is strength or a weakness.

First person narrative also affords intimacy with the author, which is non-existent in a third person narrative.

Limitations –

When writing in first person, the story and the VP character have to move together. You can't take the story where your VP character hasn't gone and you can't write about people your VP character hasn't met.

All the other characters will be described through your VP character. The reader will see him the way he sees them. It becomes difficult for the writer to describe all the characters through the VP character's point of view. In a long narrative without much action, it tends to become a little boring. You will notice that mostly the first person narrative is used with action-packed plots.

An unreliable VP character is one whom the reader doesn't trust. In *Lolita*, the VP character is a criminal, who is obsessed with Lolita. Although the reader doesn't trust him, his actions and the pace of the plot keeps the reader glued to the book.

Second Person Narrative

Second person narrative is rarely used in fiction. It addresses the reader and the character in the second person, i.e. "you". It is better for beginners not to use it, as it is extremely difficult to manage. Not many books are written in the second person narrative. Some of them are: *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* by Tom Robbins and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino.

Strengths –

It affords intimacy with the reader, as the author is addressing the reader as "you". It is the most interactive of all narratives.

Limitations –

The reader gets distracted from the author or the plot by the frequent use of "you".

You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely

unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head.

The extract has been borrowed from *Big Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney.

See how it distances the reader from the author. For beginners, it is highly recommended **not** to use it.

Third Person (Objective)

When you simply narrate the actions of the characters along with dialogues without showing what is going on in their heads, it is called third person objective.

Julie threw her purse on the table and sank into the couch. She then switched on the T.V. and started munching popcorns. Soon, she was asleep. At four, a knock at the door woke her up.

We are not told whether she is tired or not. We don't know what she is thinking about or what she is feeling. The narrative is totally objective.

Strengths –

It is a good way to build tension and mystery. The reader doesn't know the character's thoughts so he can't predict what will happen next. The reader is totally in the dark. It can be effectively used with third person limited to build suspense.

Action is of paramount importance in third person objective. It is through action that the reader gets to know the characters.

Limitations –

It is rarely used in literary fiction, as it gives no scope of using thoughts and emotions of the characters. Books, which depend upon the development of the characters by showing their psychological growth, cannot use this POV.

The reader does not feel intimate with the characters. After all, what is fiction without emotions? It is like an ocean without water.

Third Person (Omniscient)

This viewpoint affords the most freedom. Here, the author can enter into the thoughts of any of the characters. He is like God, knowing all that is going on inside the heads of the characters. *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *Bernice Bobs her Hair* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Parker Adderson*, *Philosopher* by Ambrose Bierce are some of the stories written in third person omniscient. Very few writers write in this style nowadays.

Strengths –

It presents an in-depth picture of the society, characters and situation. This POV was used to show the gullibility of the characters for comic effect by disclosing in advance what would happen. Plautus used this technique in *The Pot of Gold*.

The reader knows that Sigmund is going to trap Raymond by telling him a false tale to steal all his savings. He has been planning it for days. Raymond is totally in the dark. He doesn't know that Sigmund is going to trick him. Here, what interests the reader is how Raymond will behave. Will Raymond fall into the trap? What if he doesn't? Will he come to know that Sigmund is a cheat?

Limitations –

The characters lie beneath the plot, so that the reader doesn't get intimate with them although he knows what is going on in their heads. That is mainly because he also knows what other characters are thinking. He does not see the world in the book as the protagonist sees it. He does not share the point of view of any of the characters.

Third Person (Limited Omniscient)

Most writers use this POV because of the greater freedom it provides. The story is narrated by the use of third person i.e. "He" "She" "They". *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller are some of the novels written in third person limited.

Here, the writer can get into the heads of two or three main characters. He can show the psychology and the behavior of the characters by furnishing details about their likes and dislikes, beliefs, lifestyle, background, preferences, taste etc. That is very convenient for showing the growth of the characters during the book.

The writer is invisible to the reader. The characters are in the limelight. Mostly, the protagonist's (central character) POV dominates the narration, but the reader also knows the feelings and thoughts of a few other characters who are closely related to the protagonist. The reader is most happy with this arrangement. He can get intimate not only with the protagonist, but also a few others who are intimate with the protagonist.

Strengths –

It affords greater freedom for the writer. He can show the psychology of the main characters. It is easier to show tension and conflict even when the characters are not interacting with each other.

It can be turned into an objective viewpoint by showing how the character is feeling without his knowing it. He is in love, but he doesn't realize it. She wants to go back home, but doesn't realize it till she sees her friend with her baby.

It is the easiest narrative to manage. The writer can become subjective and objective as the plot demands. This narrative is highly recommended for beginners.

Limitations –

Due to the invisibility of the author, the reader has to depend upon the characters for the viewpoint. If the VP character is unreliable or weak or is acted upon all through the novel, the story fails.

As compared to first person narrative, the readers are not as intimate with the VP character.

Get a grip on your setting

The world you create for your story is like the background in a photograph. It gives you a context in which you can put your characters. Your setting depends on your plot and the characters. If your character is a convict and your plot revolves around the time he spends at prison, then your setting has got to be a prison. Having a prison as the setting works well for a short story, but for longer works of fiction, you need a larger geographical location like a city or a town. Larger the canvas, the more details you include in it.

Your setting should have a geographical location, culture, climate, society, animals, streets, rivers and people. Remember, your characters are a product of the society you present in your story. They will talk, behave and think the way their culture allows them to. If you want to set your story in New York, then you need to know its culture, its people, its streets. It is best to choose a place, which you have visited and about which you already know something.

Research your setting well

If you do not want to set your story on the city you live in, then get ready to do some research. It is important that you visit the place you are going to write about. Some writers do it with characters too. If they are writing about a murderer, they will go and interview one to know his psychology. For your setting too, you need to know the psychology of the city, town or village in which your characters live.

Below is a broad guideline on what all to include in your research:

City – Small town, city, countryside, country, village

Geographical aspects – Mountains, rivers, beaches, desert, forest, ocean, hills, plains, vegetation, animals

Culture – Clothes, shops, streets, people, religion, language (dialect)

Climate – Hot, cold, moderate, desert, tropical

There can be more than one setting in your book. For shorter works of fiction, having one setting is best, but for longer works, you can have more settings than one. In *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, there were three settings, the zoo in India, the ocean and Mexico (the last one was only a glimpse). He dealt with all the settings brilliantly. That is because he had visited India many times and knew it well. Of course, the writer cannot experience everything he wants to write about. Yann Martel never experienced a shipwreck, still he wrote about it. That is what research does. In one of his interviews he said that he researched about animal behavior for months on end on the Internet after he decided that the story would involve lots of animals.

In science fiction, of course, you can't really research your setting. That is all imagination.

How to build up a setting

Some writers begin with a description of the setting and some with dialogues. If you choose the former, keep the description short. The reader will get bored reading a page long description before he is introduced to any of the characters. As a writer, that is the last thing you want. Even when describing, try to be innovative and use startling similes or use two or three senses to keep the reader hooked.

Description of your setting should complement with the genre in which you are writing. Your chosen genre can be science fiction, romance, literary fiction, horror or adventure, what you need is an appropriate world, which will intensify the believability of the story. If it's a murder mystery, you need to give the reader details about the ambiance. You only have to concentrate on the scenery that is helping in adding mystery and suspense to the story, like a dark, narrow escape route or the blinding headlights and blazing horns on the road as your hero tries to catch the murderer.

Peculiarities and characteristics are what differentiate us from others. The same holds true for the setting. Lend it a personality by including details, which are typical of that place. It can be a particular structure of the houses, the texture of the earth, too much rain, general behavior of the people etc. It's not that you have to stick to it no matter what. You can use innovation and exaggerate an element a little for creating a dramatic effect.

A page long description about the setting bores the reader. To avoid that, couple it with a character's actions.

Thanks to Orr, his roommate, it was the most luxurious tent in the squadron. Each time Yossarian returned from one of his holidays in the hospital or rest leaves in Rome, he was surprised by some new comfort Orr had installed in his absence – running water, wood-burning fireplace, cement floor.

The extract has been borrowed from *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller

You can also have a character describe the setting. Even a half page long third person narration of the setting can be used. Give it to the reader in installments.

Writing dialogues

Good writers reveal their characters mainly through dialogues, not description. What a character says shows us what kind of a person he is. Is he selfish, lazy, arrogant, shy, self-conscious or aggressive? To write effective dialogues, you need to use appropriate words to portray the personality of a character.

Decoding a character through dialogues

It is not necessary to fill in pages with a character's conversation. Short dialogues, if properly used, produce a stronger effect than long dialogues. Take a look at this extract from *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. The protagonist, Yossarian is in the hospital.

'Oh, pretty good,' he answered. 'I've got a slight pain in my liver and I haven't been the most regular of fellows, I guess, but all in all I must admit that I feel pretty good.'

'That's good,' said the chaplain.

'Yes,' Yossarian said. 'Yes, that is good.'

'I meant to come around sooner,' the chaplain said, 'but I really haven't been well.'

'That's too bad,' Yossarian said.

'Just a head cold,' the chaplain added quickly.

'I've got a fever of a hundred and one,' Yossarian added just as quickly.

'That's too bad,' said the chaplain.

'Yes,' Yossarian agreed. 'Yes, that is too bad.'

The chaplain fidgeted. 'Is there anything I can do for you?' he asked after a while.

'No, no,' Yossarian sighed. 'The doctors are doing all that's humanly possible, I suppose.'

'No, no.' The chaplain colored faintly. 'I didn't mean anything like that. I meant cigarettes . . . books . . . or . . . toys.'

'No, no,' Yossarian said. 'Thank you. I have everything I need, I suppose – everything but good health.'

'That is too bad.'

'Yes,' Yossarian said. 'Yes, that is too bad.'

The overall feeling is that of boredom. Neither the chaplain nor Yossarian have anything to talk about therefore their conversation is abrupt and broken.

How did the writer create this feeling? You will notice how a dialogue has been repeated many times over. Yossarian and the chaplain alternatively keep saying 'That's too bad' or 'That is too bad'. Repetition bores, not only the reader but also the characters. Yossarian keeps repeating 'That's too bad' after the chaplain. He even goes a step further and extends it to 'That is too bad'. Clearly, he doesn't want to talk to the chaplain.

Another interesting fact is that neither of them is remotely interested in the other. When the chaplain says that he hasn't been well, Yossarian doesn't inquire after his health. The chaplain however tells him that he has a head cold. Yossarian immediately tells him that he has a fever. He exaggerates it by telling him that it is 'a hundred and one' not just 'one hundred'. What he wants to suggest is that he has as many problems as the chaplain if not more.

You learn something about the character of Yossarian from this dialogue. He is concerned only with himself. He exaggerates his problems. He lies and he speaks his mind.

About the chaplain, we learn that he is polite and understanding. He is clearly uncomfortable talking to Yossarian, but he is trying to do his best. He colored when asking Yossarian if he needed toys, which tells us that he is shy and somewhat timid. Like Yossarian, he doesn't lose a chance to exhibit his problems.

Here, we were using dialogues to get to the character, but while writing you need to do just the opposite. Create dialogues according to the characteristics of the character. Yossarian is selfish and frank. His favorite pastime is to relate his problem to someone. You need to show these characteristics to the reader through dialogues. Write words in such a way that it highlights these characteristics of Yossarian, in the same way as Joesph Heller did in the passage above.

Use short dialogues

Dialogues that run for more than ten lines become tiresome when they are not placed correctly. Sometimes, characters and plot demand long dialogues. There might arise a need for longer dialogues to show a garrulous, excited, crazy or desperate character who might speak a lot. At other times, the demands of the plot might force you to make a character narrate an incident or a story. Even in such a situation, it is better to break a long dialogue by inserting short dialogues by other characters. Another character might interrupt the long dialogue by saying:

'What! Do you think I am dumb? I believe in your story as I believe in Saint Patazuma.'
'I don't care whether you believe in Saint Patazuma or not. I believe in Saint Patazuma.'
'Who's Saint Patazuma?'
'A saint. Now listen.'

A dialogue should not be stuffed with unnecessary information. I could have written the second last dialogues this way too. 'I don't know any Saint Patazuma. Who is he?' If it is clear from 'Who's Saint Patazuma?' that the character doesn't know him, you don't need to unnecessarily extend the dialogue by repeating what is evident. This is called wordiness; the natural impulse to write more than what is necessary. Every writer suffers from it, but it is good to know that practice minimizes it and editing corrects it.

What lies hidden?

You are halfway through your story and your characters are changing. The fragile heroine is now growing bold. She is taking a stand. Shouldn't your dialogues show that change?

Observe how shy people talk. They might not speak at all, instead they may nod, point, use facial expressions or certain gestures when that can suffice. When pressed, they may use syllables to express themselves. They may talk at length at home, but among strangers they feel uncomfortable. They will always speak in a soft tone with a low voice. Now that is your heroine. You have been giving her very little dialogues at first, but now that she has started getting bold, you will have to show that change through your dialogues. She will be direct. Her voice will be louder. She will speak where she merely gesticulated earlier. She will not be afraid of an argument.

'Where is my book? I had left it on the table,' she said worriedly. 'Gracy, did you see my book?' she asked even when she knew it was her who had taken it. It was peeping from under her coat.

That is your heroine at the start. Now look at her at the middle.

'I want that book right there when I come back,' she said aloud to no one, yet Gracy understood that the book was not to be touched.

Now she has authority. She is powerful and brave. It is through the combination of dialogues and narration that you can make the reader see a character.

Change in perspective

It is clever to unfold a character's personality by the use of another character. Your brother thinks that he is witty, but you may not think so. Difference in perspective sharpens a character's image.

Anna feels she is beautiful. She adores herself in front of the mirror everyday, she tells herself how perfect her eyes, nose, lips and cheeks are. She puts on make-up as soon as she is out of bed. The reader will believe you. Anna is beautiful. Then you bring in her brother, Sean. He tells her to stop poking her ugly nose in his matters. He tells her not to smile in front of his friends because her mouth is too big. Now, the reader understands that she is not pretty, and is extremely conscious and guilty of her ugliness.

Charlotte Bronte used this technique to focus the image of *Jane Eyre* early in the book.

Miss Abbot turned to divest a stout leg of the necessary ligature. This preparation for bonds, and the additional ignominy it inferred, took a little excitement out of me.

"Don't take them off," I cried; "I will not stir."

In guarantee whereof, I attached myself to my seat by my hands.

"Mind you don't," said Bessie; and when she had ascertained that I was really subsiding, she loosened her hold of me; then she and Miss Abbot stood with folded arms, looking darkly and doubtfully on my face, as incredulous of my sanity.

"She never did so before," at last said Bessie, turning to the Abigail.

"But it was always in her," was the reply. "I've told Missis often my opinion about the child, and Missis agreed with me. She's an underhand little thing: I never saw a girl of her age with so much cover."

This extract has been borrowed from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte.

What others think of a character is as important as what the character thinks about herself. Here, Miss Abbot even includes Missis (Aunt Reed) to make her statement strong.

In presenting the character of Jane Eyre, the author has included strong emotions in her dialogues. From the very beginning we can see how self-respecting, rebellious and passionate she is.

"Well, you have been crying, Miss Jane Eyre; can you tell me what about? Have you any pain?"

"No, sir."

"Oh! I daresay she is crying because she could not go out with Missis in the carriage," interposed Bessie.

"Surely not! Why, she is too old for such pettishness."

I thought so too; and my self-esteem being wounded by the false charge, I answered promptly, "I never cried for such a thing in my life: I hate going out in the carriage. I cry because I am miserable."

A good character presents himself strongly from the beginning. He may be likable or not, but he does feel acutely and speaks his mind. It is even better if there is a conflict between your protagonist and other characters. That will reveal your protagonist's deeply felt emotions effectively.

Things to remember

1. Page after page of dialogues can become dull. To counter that, use short narratives to break the dialogues. Occasionally, you may have a page length dialogue without a break, but that should be just that, occasionally.

2. Include physical or emotional details with the close of the dialogue.

“I don’t want to go,” I said, **with hurt pride**.

This simple dialogue has changed tone by the addition of ‘hurt pride’. Without it, ‘I don’t want to go,’ would have remained just that. She doesn’t want to go. After ‘hurt pride’ it has turned into rebelliousness.

3. You can also use repetition, certain phrases, accent, slang etc. to bring forth a character’s personality. Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain speaks English with an accent, as he is a Negro.

He got up and stretched his neck out about a minute, listening. Then he says:

"Who dah?"

When you do that, make sure that it can be easily understood by the reader, otherwise he may get impatient or annoyed.

Use and misuse of clichés

Clichés are overused words, which have lost their true meaning. Mostly, writers avoid using clichés because of this. They speak of redundancy and lack of novelty. But sometimes you can use clichés to make a point. A pedant can use clichéd phrases excessively to show off his knowledge or a child can innocently misuse a cliché he read in a book to the embarrassment of the mother. If used cleverly, clichés can be useful for the writer.

While using metaphors and similes make sure that it is not a cliché. Many of the clichés are mini metaphors and similes. Below is a list of clichés, which you can use and watch out against the possibility of their misuse.

Clichéd Phrases and Words

Ahead of his time
A penny for your thoughts
For a good cause
All smoke and no fire
Easier said than done
Fresh as a daisy
Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder
Another way of saying it
Give and take
Fistfight
As pure as snow
As white as snow
Tailor-made
All things grow with love
Gory
As clear as mud
An empty head is the devil's workshop
Making a mountain out of a molehill
Around the clock
Better half
As a matter of fact
Fighting like cats and dogs
Hard to swallow
In a nutshell
As white as a sheet
Best foot forward

Every rose has its thorn
Last but not the least
Beating around the bush
Blood bath
As easy as pie
Out of the blue moon
Bridge the gap
Like father, like son
Burning the midnight oil
Look before you leap
Dawned on me
Change of heart
Cock and bull story
There's no place like home
Curiosity killed the cat
Beauty is a fading flower
Better safe than sorry
Following in his footsteps
Crocodile tears
Dead duck
As good as gold
Up for grabs
Lost and found
Deep inside
Love is blind
Blowing hot and cold
Better late than never
Down and out
No news is good news
A cock and bull story
Eat, drink and be merry
Every dog has its day
Time heals all wounds
Tough nut to crack
All's well that ends well
No stone unturned
Words of wisdom
Big brother is watching
The grass is greener on the other side
Failed to make an impression
A bottomless pit
The first impression is the last impression
Fit as a fiddle
Figure of speech
Time is money
Fits like a glove

Behind closed doors
Sleeping like a log
A bitter pill
All is fair in love and war
Getting off on the wrong foot
Good riddance
Been there before
All in good time
Every cloud has a silver lining
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust
As busy as a bee
No point in crying over spilt milk
Too hot to handle
Take a ride
Glimmer of hope
The writing on the wall
Panic button
Put on your thinking cap
Above and beyond the call of duty
According to the experts
A half-baked idea
Haste makes waste
Against all odds
Birds of a feather flock together
A hard day's work
Easy come, easy go
Butterflies in the stomach
Catch me if you can
A stitch in time saves nine
At a loss for words
Knee deep
Kiss of death
Tried and tested
Make hay while the sun shines
Mind over matter
Nerve wracking
None of your business
On cloud nine
Laughter is the best medicine
On top of the world
Close shave
Open door policy
Out of this world
Picture perfect
Practice what you preach
Close as ice

Beggars can't be choosers
Dressed to kill
As fast as lightening
Through thick and thin
Practice makes perfect
Eye to eye
Don't worry, be happy
Raining cats and dogs
Keep your fingers crossed
Put a rest to
Society at large
Fall head over heels
Caught red-handed
Down in the dumps
Do or die
To err is human
Sleep like a baby
Free as a bird
As cool as cucumber
Buckle down
Darkest before the dawn
Count your blessings
By hook or by crook
Bite the dust
At a snail's pace
Tomorrow is another day
Hoping against hope
Lead from the front
Stranger than fiction
Straight as an arrow
The eleventh hour
Dare to be different
Live and let lives
The plot thickens
What goes around comes around
A feather in his cap
Piece of cake
Black as coal
Cold shoulder
As good as it gets

What's your style?

Just like every person is unique, every piece of writing is also unique, even though the same writer might have written it. That is because of our difference in outlook, beliefs, upbringing, education, culture and society. A writer passes these onto his writing.

Every writer has a unique style of writing; the only thing to know is what's **your** style. For a beginner, it is difficult. I remember myself copying the style of the author I liked best when I had not discovered my own. For me it took lots of time, thinking and practicing, but you don't have to follow the trial and error method.

What to do, what not to do

It doesn't matter in which genre you are writing, what matters is how you are writing. For a novice writer, it is very natural to get influenced by the master's of that genre. I subconsciously copied T.S. Eliot and stopped only when my professor pointed it out to me. What you need to do is to be proud. Yes, I mean it. Be proud of your writing, be sure of what you want to achieve through your writing, be confident that one day you will become one of the greatest writers in the world. Dream big. Don't be awed by any writer, instead try to learn from their writings.

Shakespeare was a person just like you and me. If he could do it, so can you. Look at the writings of masters with a critical eye. Ask yourself: What makes them great? How do they develop their characters? How do they move the plot forward? How do they create suspense? Getting at the finer points of writing will make you a better writer.

Observe, observe and observe. There are some things, which no book can teach you about writing. That is good for you because that knowledge will be exclusive to you. That is what will make you stand apart from all the other writers. That will shape your style. Observe the scenery when you go out, observe the people, observe the vegetation, observe the way people talk. Try to see and hear all you can.

Personally, I stop reading fiction when I am writing a lengthy piece of fiction like a novel. It still influences my writing. There might be others like me. I remember another author who also stopped reading books when he was writing. (I can't recall his name) If you are having the same problem, it is better to read books of genres in which you are **not** writing.

How to discover your style

Write everyday. You must have heard this advice a thousand times; that is because it works. Every piece you write improves your writing. Write five short stories and compare the first one with the last one. You will see the difference.

To discover your writing style, you will need to go deep inside you. Close your eyes and think: What do I want to write about? What matters to me the most? What do I want to share with others? Once you have got a theme, think of the characters in the same way. You now know how to create powerful characters. When you have made an outline of the characters, think of a plot. It is better to think about the plot keeping in mind the interests of the readers, so you can do it with your eyes open.

When you believe in your theme with conviction, when you can visualize your characters and know the twists and turns of your plot, you start writing. Try your best to express your (or your character's) feelings to the reader. When you have finished writing the first draft, read it. You will be amazed to see that you have written the story **in your own style**.

What makes them different?

Below are three beginnings of novels of different genres. All three start with description.

Love story – *The Bridge Across Forever* by Richard Bach

She'll be here today.

I looked down from the cockpit, down through wind and propeller-blast, down through half a mile of autumn to my rented hayfield, to the sugar-chip that was my FLY-\$3-FLY sign tied to the open gate.

Both sides of the road around the sign were jammed with cars. There must have been sixty of them, and a crowd to match, come to see the flying. She could be there this moment, just arrived. I smiled at that. Could be!

Mystery - *The Golden Ball* by Agatha Christie

Mrs. St. Vincent was adding up figures. Once or twice she sighed, and her hand stole to her aching forehead. She has always disliked arithmetic. It was unfortunate that nowadays her life should seem to be composed entirely of one particular kind of sum, the ceaseless adding together of small necessary items of expenditure making a total that never failed to surprise and alarm her.

Literary - *Dombey and Son* by Charles Dickens

Dombey sat in the corner of the darkened room in the great armchair by the bedside, and Son lay tucked up warm in a little basket bedstead, carefully disposed on a low settle immediately in front of the fire and close to it, as if his constitution were analogous to that a muffin, and it was essential to toast him brown while he was very new.

All three beginning start with the description of a character. It may be the protagonist, we don't know still. If you look casually, you will not find any marked difference in their writing. But if you look closely, you will see the difference in how they describe the characters.

In *The Bridge Across Forever*, the author has started the novel with a short sentence 'She'll be here today'. This tells the reader that the character, who is definitely a male, is thinking about a woman. Then the author introduces immediacy into the narrative by showing the character is flying an airplane and looking down at the crowd. The last few sentences again bring the focus on the woman. That's an exciting start for a romance.

Agatha Christie has described the character of Mrs. Vincent in the first paragraph of her novel, *The Golden Ball*. Mrs. Vincent's financial condition is forcing her to keep accounts, which she hates to do. She hates it so much that she has even got a headache because of it. Along with describing the character, the author has also specified her financial problems.

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens starts by placing Mr. Dombey in the setting, which is suggestive of his personality. Mr. Dombey is sitting on a 'great armchair' in the 'corner' of the 'darkened' room. These words tell the reader something about the personality of Mr. Dombey. He is proud and an introvert. His son is compared to a muffin. The metaphor is for effect.

All are descriptions of characters, but they are described differently. Juxtaposing of one or two elements in descriptions is a mark of a good writer. These 'elements' are thoughts, setting, behavior, conversation with other characters, and situation. Follow your instincts to find out which combination of elements you prefer to use.

Bravo! You have read through. That shows how serious you are about writing. I hope you got some good insights into fiction writing from *Begin Writing Fiction*. For any questions or comments, good or bad, write to me at: shruti@literaryzone.com. Also, you can visit my website: www.literaryzone.com to get more writing tips, and read my novel 'The Rise of the Dawn' and some short stories. Thanks.

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