

The Magical Writer

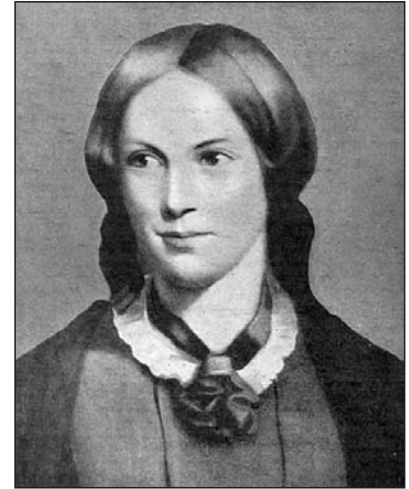
Contents

Introduction — Welcome to Magical Writing



Seven Sessions

- 1) Creating Magical Writing Space
- 2) Invoking Characters and Allies
- 3) Working with Narrative Energy
- 4) Integrating Our Inner Critic
- 5) Plot, Story, and Myth
- 6) The Alchemy of Editing
- 7) Taking Writing Into the World



The Craft

- A) Creating Engaging Incipits
- B) Promises and Cliffhangers
- C) Five-Act Structures
- D) Creating Vibrant Characters



Appendices

- Narrative Energy In Casablanca
- The Nine Muses



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Images from top: Charlotte Brönte, Sappho, Dante Alighieri, W.E.B. Dubois.

The Magical Writer

Introduction — Welcome to Magical Writing

What is writing to you?

Something you do every day? A dream job? An all-too-real job? Journaling? Something you did in college? A glimmer of an idea for a story you want to tell?

Is it your hope to write a novel? A memoir? A dissertation? A recipe book? Poetry? Short fiction? A compelling grant application?

Whatever your writing ambitions — why stop with just one? — we benefit from the support of a steady magical practice. If you have a daily practice, you'll find ways to weave support for your writing. If you don't have a practice, here's a chance to develop simple yet powerful personal magic.

Writing, like rituals, spellwork, and other aspects of magic, involves working with and shaping flows of energy. Magical experience and skills can bring new support and richness to our art.

From creating sacred space in which to write, to invoking characters, to integrating the shadows of the Inner Critic — welcome to magical writing.

Join a class — or form your own group

This series of handouts forms the basis of a seven-week class taught in the Reclaiming tradition. The class is taught in the San Francisco Bay Area and other locales, and also via online classes.

The seven numbered sessions cover:

- Creating Magical Writing Space
- Invoking Allies and Characters
- Working with Narrative Energy
- Shadow Work — Integrating our Inner Critic
- Plot, Story, and Myth
- Editing Alchemy
- Taking Writing Into the World

In addition, there is a series of “Craft” handouts which focus on various aspects of narrative writing. These skills are woven into the seven classes, and also form an advanced curriculum for repeat students.

To find out about upcoming classes, visit www.directaction.org/magicalwriter/, or email george@directaction.org

Or you can download the flyers and gather your own group to work through this material. If you do, drop me a line and let me know how it's going.

See page 2 for exercises

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With magical tools such as circle-casting, ancestor invocations, trances, and spellwork, we'll free our expressive gifts and strengthen our belief in ourselves as artists.

We will also work on writing that expresses our unique voice, creating plot-structures, developing characters, and other aspects of the writers' craft. Each class includes directed writing time.

Class is suitable for those working on writing projects who want a supportive circle and new inspiration, and those looking to begin the process. Although you'll determine your own work-pace, be prepared to dedicate time to your writing, and to write for at least ten minutes each day.

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Magical Writing Ancestor — the scribe Nebmestab of ancient Egypt.

The Magical Writer

Introduction

Are You Ready?

Joining a Magical Writing circle is about commitment. Most people *can* write — the question is, who actually does. We'll use magic to make our work more sustainable, to develop and improve our writing — and most of all, to learn to enjoy the entire process.

Before you sign up, you can use magical tools to discern whether this class is right for you at this time.

Try these exercises. If they work for you and you are ready to commit to seven weekly sessions and to ten minutes a day of writing, the class may be a good fit for you.

Set up a writing altar. Dedicate a space that you can leave set up. Decorate your altar with inspirational objects, writing tools, favorite books, etc. Spend a couple of minutes a day at the altar, breathing and opening yourself to the flow of your writing. Afterward, do a few minutes of freewriting before starting into a project.

Do a tarot reading about your writing. Ask for direction in your creativity, then draw a few cards. Remember — the cards are a source of inspiration and fresh perspective. The final decision is yours. (Never done tarot? See Handout # 1 for a sample reading. Don't have a deck? You'll need one. If in doubt, start with the Rider-Waite deck.)

Create magical space and write. Cast a circle, call in allies, and see if it makes a difference. See Handout #1 for ideas.

Ask: Would it be helpful to have others to talk with about this process? Do you have the attention and patience to listen to others talk about their artistic process?

Movie Magic

The “magic of film” may be a cliché, but for many people movies are the most powerful form of storytelling we know.

Beyond special effects, exotic locations, and dream fulfillment, film brings a special element of magic to the craft of writing: we can experience an entire story in a single sitting.

For learning the craft of writing, this telescoping is invaluable. I learned a lot about the possibilities of the novel by reading *War and Peace*. But I can't very well re-read the book ten times in one month to study its nuances.

When the plotcraft of *Ever After* captivated me, though, I could watch the film twenty times (and the opening scenes far more) to study every character interaction, every transition, every subtle foreshadowing...

When I unexpectedly enjoy a movie, I go back and watch the opening to see where they first hooked me — and how. What was its special magic?

When a promising film disappoints me, I think about how it might have been written or directed differently.

In discussing plot and character development, we'll refer to movies as often as to novels. In particular you'll want to have seen these films:

- *Dirty Dancing*
- *Casablanca*
- *The Wizard of Oz*
- *The Sound of Music*
- *Sliding Doors*
- *Ever After*

Writing Exercises

Write About Your Life

Dedicate ten minutes a day to journaling about your life, your thoughts, strange things you've seen or heard, ways in which the world is an irritating place, etc.

Set a realistic goal. Maybe it's “five of the next seven days.” Maybe it's “300 minutes this month,” and keep a running tally. Find what works. Celebrate when you reach a milestone. Try a different approach when you miss.

Write as if it matters. Even if at first you have to make believe. For ten minutes a day, pretend it matters. Light a candle.

Write one day as if all the world will read it. On another, write for your eyes only. Write for the Goddess, whose eyes and ears you may be. Write for the future, who may want to know what it was like to be alive just as the Great Turning got underway.

Write About Something Else

Write about something besides your life.

Maybe you already have a project underway. If so, here's a chance to work on it and say you're doing magical writing.

If you're looking for a new challenge, consider starting one paragraph at a time. Write a good paragraph describing your living room, a person you are watching, a news event you heard about, etc. Try to capture it in one paragraph.

Take a short break. Then rewrite one of your paragraphs three times, starting as differently as possible each time.

Breathe into the variety of your writing.

The Magical Writer

Session 1 — Creating Magical Writing Space

I get home from a meeting at 10pm, and have to be in bed by 1am. I have three hours to write.

As I enter my room, I am greeted by a stack of unpaid bills and unanswered letters on my desk. A scribbled To Do List lays across my keyboard. Next to my desk is a file cabinet stacked high with important papers and unfiled notes.

I check email, and immediately get sucked into elist drama concerning a protest I didn't attend, but have opinions about. I spend some time rewriting my response, and finally send it.

Then I take a quick look at Facebook and write a few comments so my friends know I care about them. And I may as well check sports scores while I'm online.

Finally, about 12:15am, I am ready for "my writing time." This takes place at the same desk, staring at the same piles of papers, which are constantly distracting me and reminding me of all the work I need to get done. I manage to eke out 45 minutes of writing, but it's uninspired, and doesn't look that different from the emails I wrote.

Maybe I need to try something different?

Creating and honoring our workspace is one of the main ways we can use everyday magic to support our creative process.

We can do this in both psychic and material ways. At the material level, I might ask, just as I would of ritual space: Is my workspace clean, uncluttered, and pleasing to my senses? Can I shift the lighting as desired? Do I have easy access to my work-tools?

Do I want books, feather-quills, empty teacups, half-sliced loaves of bread, and other writerly accoutrements around me, or do I want an open, uncluttered space?

Altars are part of a magical workspace. A writing altar reflects the dedicated space in our psyche. It serves as a reminder of the sacredness of our task and our tools. Pens, notebooks, digital recorders, and the like can be given places of honor instead of being tossed onto a cluttered desk.

Psychically, I can begin each work session by casting a circle, invoking the support of the elements, ancestors, deities, and other energies. If I spend five minutes getting grounded in my workspace, I'll reap the benefits in more focused writing.

I also find it useful to do "boundary-mirroring" before I work (see page 2). I find this doubly useful before checking email, to avoid getting sucked into other people's dramas and using my creative time and energy writing unnecessary responses.

See page 2 for exercises

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*Magical Writing Ancestor — Saint Matthew
from the Ebbo Gospels, c. 825 AD.*

The Magical Writer

Exercises — Session 1

Creating Magical Writing Space

Create a more magical writing space. Think of it as a process, not a task to be completed.

Clear and redecorate the space. What do you really want/need around you to feel inspired and creative?

Visualize your ideal writing space. What can you do to bring that space one step closer to fruition?

Experiment with sound/music. Does different music evoke different writing or work pace?

What about lighting? When I was younger, I liked a single direct light on the page. Now I prefer brighter light in the room.

Create a writing altar, or dedicate space on your altar to your art.

Dedicating Our Tools

Collect your writing tools — keyboard, pens, journal, laptop, eraser, iPod...

Create a simple ceremony in which you dedicate each tool. Perhaps you invoke the power of the tool, or ask it to support you in your work.

Do the tools want a special home? Maybe the keyboard wants a sacred cloth that covers it between sessions. Maybe your favorite pen wants its own place on the desk. Maybe your laptop wants to be decorated.

As with any spellwork, be clear in your intent — ask the tools to support you and respect your boundaries, and not run rampant with your creative energy.

Mirror Work

Affirmations

Try looking in a mirror and saying: “Welcome writer!”

Try looking in a mirror and repeating this understatement (from co-counseling):

“It sometimes happens that someone writes a book.” Pause — What do you notice? What words pop into your head?

Repeat it several times, then stop and free-write.

Boundaries

Mirror-Boundaries – after grounding and casting a circle, I close my eyes and breathe in “unconditional respect and support for myself and my work.” I picture this coming from above and below. Then I take a hand mirror, face-out, and circle it three times around me (my head, chest, and gut), repeating this simple verselet (while keeping my main attention on what I am invoking, not what I am repelling):

For all other energy sent toward me /
May it harmlessly reflected be.

(I prefer this to an improvised statement because it affirms the point without requiring me to think about what I’m repelling – I can keep most of my attention on the “unconditional respect.”)

Mirror Etiquette

Kurt Vonnegut calls mirrors “leaks.”

Beware leaving a magical mirror lying face-up in your space. De-charge a mirror by drawing counter-clockwise circles around it, or dipping it into salt-water.

Writing Exercises

Cover Blurp

Who Am I? — write an introduction to yourself in glowing terms, citing past achievements and awards (real or fictional), favorite Italian recipes, etc.

Then hone it down to 100 words that will grace the back cover of your next book.

Why Write?

Introduce a fictional character — first or third person — who feels compelled to write.

What is the person like? What specifically do they feel called to write? How does the compulsion manifest? How do they (and others) deal with it?

Tarot Writing

You can do this exercise for yourself, or do a reading for one of your characters.

Draw three cards, face down — Past influences, Present situation, and Future challenge or call.

Read each card, then stop and free-write what it brings up. After you've read all three, reflect on any common threads.

Read cards as you will, or try this method:

- (1) Name three things or objects on the card. No stories, just name them.
- (2) Name one object or being on the card that is you.
- (3) Make up a one-sentence story about what is happening in the card.
- (4) Ask: What is this card telling me about my situation (past, present, future, etc).

The Magical Writer

Session 2 — Invoking Characters and Allies

What if I could close my eyes, breathe deeply, call on the names of my fictional characters — and they would step forth from the mists and tell me their stories, fully formed, exactly at the speed I can type?

If I could do that, I could quit my day job! Sadly, it's not quite that simple. But I've found that characters *can* be invoked, can join us in our work, and are excited to share their stories with us.

Invoking Magical Allies

We're familiar with ancestor and deity invocations from our ritual work. We know the power of calling their energy and their wisdom into our circle.

Our cultural ancestors can be powerful allies to our art. When I was writing about the English Revolution, I invoked a whole circle of ancestors from the mid-1600s, from Cromwell and Milton to the Digger and Leveller pamphleteers.

Ancestors can anchor our circle — I often find specific ancestors in particular directions, sometimes quite specific (one appears at north-by-northwest).

Who or what spirits anchor North for you? Which are in the East, direction of expression, of new beginnings? Which tend toward the West and hold emotional or liminal gifts and challenges?

Invoking Characters and their Energies

Deities and ancestors sometimes represent the “encapsulation” of particular energies. For instance, Susan B. Anthony might encapsulate the spirit of the Suffragettes. Invoking her might call forth an entire transformational movement.

Similarly, fictional characters often represent types of energy. Elinor represents “sense,” Marianne “sensibility.” Frank Hardy is cool and collected, Joe Hardy is hot-headed and impetuous.

Just as we can invoke different energies by calling different deities or ancestors, we can tap into the energetic movements of the universe via our fictional characters. If I invoke a quiet but passionate character, I am calling on that sort of energy in the wider world to coalesce and speak to me.

In my experience, the messages I hear are seldom linear or narrative — it's more like hearing excited kids describing their experiences at summer camp. Ideas and inspirations come flooding out, from literal descriptions to mythical overlays. My work is to take this raw material and refashion it into narrative prose.

See page 2 for exercises

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Sappho, mosaic from Pompeii, c. 50 AD.

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The Magical Writer

Exercises — Session 2

Invoking Characters

Ground and cast a circle. Call any allies you wish. Then try calling a character from your writing.

Maybe the character shows up and starts chattering. Maybe you have to watch patiently for ripples in your energetic circle.

I learned by experience to invite characters to the edge of my circle, not inside. I ask for their presence and support, not for them to take over my consciousness.

Characters don't typically speak to me in linear prose. It's more like an energetic presence within which I write. I feel encouraged or nudged in certain narrative directions, and can feel a pervasive delight as I develop the energy into a readable story.

I strengthen my contact by reading about the period or situation of a character, or by using divination to help me "listen." (See column three for Tarot ideas.)

Aspecting and Channeling?

If we can invoke characters, why not try to aspect or channel them? Probably for the same reason we don't typically try to channel deities or ancestors. Strange things may happen, but coherent expression is not always high on the list.

Still, why not try writing within a meditative or trance space, where I invite a character to speak through me? I wouldn't expect Pulitzer-winning prose, but it may be a way to generate raw material.

If you're going to write within trance, find a partner and take turns, so someone is tracking mundane reality. Afterward, reground into the daily world with familiar food, a bath, a movie, etc.

Ancestor Magic

The Tree of My Writing

Draw a simple tree-trunk about 2 inches tall in the center of a page.

From its base, stretch a bunch of root-lines. On each line, write an influence on your writing: authors, teachers, friends, animals, clouds, moments of power and beauty...

After you have a dozen or so, stop, re-read them, and breathe into their gifts.

Now draw some branches from the top of the trunk. Label them with things you want from your writing.

Read them and breathe. Then let your eyes run from roots to branches, over and over, seeing and feeling the flow. Breathe and ground the energy into your center.

Honoring & Invoking Ancestors

Are there writing-ancestors that I want to call to my circle? What gifts or challenges am I asking them to bring? What gifts (food, altar items, etc) do I offer?

As with invoking characters, my own practice is to invite them to the *edge* of the circle, and not within. I am listening, not channeling.

Ancestor Etiquette

I ask: Is this ancestor truly "mine" to call back? Is there a history of cultural appropriation that I risk perpetuating?

Am I hearing *all* of the ancestor's story, or just the parts I like? I might use Tarot and other tools to open to the whole story.

Is the ancestor asking something of me beyond my writing? What is my response?

Writing Exercises

Ancestor Writing

Try writing a page in the style of a favorite ancestor. Try it as serious writing and/or parody. Try capturing their dialog.

Ben Franklin would find a piece of writing he admired, make an outline, and then set it aside. A while later he would try, from the outline, to rewrite the original prose. Of course, Ben Franklin is not usually considered a great stylist. But his books are still in print, so maybe it's worth a try.

Rant-Writing

Take a minute and come up with a topic that you would like to rant about.

Now spend 3-5 minutes spewing. Don't try to be linear, grammatical, or coherent. Just vent your thoughts and feelings.

Take a breather. Then, working from your rant, construct a scene (or part of one) in which this material is voiced.

Try it as dialog, or as interior monolog. Where does it take place? Can you bring some conflict into the scene? What is at stake for the character(s)?

Character Tarot Reading

Draw some cards for your character, and scribe the reading. See Session 1 handout for a model reading, or use your own.

What if the character asks a question about themselves, and you give them a reading? Can you assist the character in their journey of self-discovery?

After a break (a short while or a couple of days), try invoking your character, then writing from your tarot-notes.

The Magical Writer

Session 3 — Working with Narrative Energy

Painters work with pigments and color. Sculptors work with stone and shape. Quilters work with cloth and pattern.

What is the “raw material” of writing?

Is it words? Should I read a lexicon to sharpen my skills? Or is it ideas? Maybe I should enroll in a philosophy program. And what about life experience at the School of Hard Knocks — I sure hope that counts for something!

All of these are important ways of calling forth and shaping our material. But what *is* that raw material?

When we write, we are working with energy.

Which by a happy coincidence is exactly what we do in ritual: calling forth and shaping flows of energy. As magical writers, we bring special skills to our art.

Anyone whose art unfolds in time — writers, musicians, gymnasts, protesters, ritualists — works with the flow of energy. We shape the rises and falls, the climaxes and resolutions, into a unique expression.

These flows can't be reduced to formulas, or we get bubblegum songs and treacly Hollywood snoozers. But we can study the flow of narrative energy in works we appreciate and apply the lessons to our own writing.

Where Does It Come From?

One of my favorite artistic mistakes is trying to “source” this energy from within myself. After a few hours of writing (or speaking, singing, protesting, etc), I often feel depleted, lackluster, and uncreative. I am hardly being fed by my art!

Ritual work reminds me that much energy is available — some for the asking (via the elements, or certain deities and ancestors), while other energies require training, magical preparations, etc (as with other deities and ancestors, or with physically demanding practices).

Creative energy surrounds us — growing plants, vibrant children, fresh ideas, new songs and stories... Every new burst of energy is a reminder that creativity is blossoming around us. Our task is to open to its flow.

Magical skills are a great aid in this work. When I take time to ground myself and cast a circle, and spend a few moments invoking supportive energies (see back side of this handout), I work with more lightness and ease, and (sometimes at least) I'm less exhausted by the process.

Creating a more supportive writing space and invoking characters (see Session 2 handout) and are ways I open myself to the flow of creative energy around me.

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Germaine Necker, Madame de Staël. Writer and salon hostess in pre-revolutionary France, late 1700s.

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Exercises — Session 3

Invoking Energy

Invoking energy is akin to invoking elements or deities, but rather than an entity, I call forth a flow of creative energy.

I begin by grounding and spend some extra time drawing up heat from the core of the Earth, letting it slowly flow up my spine and out my crown. I find working with the chakra energy centers helpful — see below.

Invoking Specific Energy

Once I feel grounded, I cast a circle and invoke the elements — sometimes giving each element attention, other times using a short song.

Then I invoke qualities of energy that I want present in my work: focus, flow, humor, ease, truth.... I name them one at a time and breathe in their energy. Jotting the words on a Post-It helps reinforce these qualities as I work, and reminds me to thank the energies when I finish.

I like to materialize the energy I've called. If I invoke "ease," I set a timer and take regular breaks, make tea, etc. If I invoke "humor," I might listen to Lenny Bruce to get inspired.

Experiment with invoking energy and feeling its presence — and finding ways to keep it present as you work.

Chakras — Energy Centers

The chakras, a concept from Eastern spiritual traditions, are energy centers of the body. I find it useful to work with the centers that run up the spine, giving each chakra a bit of attention as I ground, call energy, etc.

Wikipedia has a good intro article.

Energy Maps*

Adopting a device from the business pages, we can chart the rise and fall of energy, just like the Dow tracks stock prices.

Here's a simple rise-and-fall chart. If this were a movie, the first half would be like a Schwarzenegger action flick, but the second half would be pretty dull:



Let's stretch out the action, put the peak near the end, and shorten the denouement:



This still resembles an action movie. The excitement must rise and rise, since there's nothing else holding the viewer. But what about a bit of nuance — a few more rises and falls:



And finally, let's add a burst of energy right at the top, before we drop down and build back up (Beethoven liked this structure — *Casablanca* also uses it):



* — a *Plot-Crafting* handout will go into more detail on this topic.

Writing Exercises

Create an Energy Map

Using your intuition, draw an energy-chart for the opening scene(s) of a favorite popular movie. Hollywood films are easy to map — art films are more subtle.

Does the energy shoot up right away, or start low and rise? How long from the beginning to the first peak? What energy and action create this peak?

What devices does the film use to raise or maintain the energy? Action? Interpersonal tensions? Mystery?

At what point does the film begin to feed background information (exposition)? How much of the first ten minutes are consumed by exposition? How does the film do this? Does it get boring?

Writing Under Constraints

Introducing an artificial limitation into our writing (or music, dance, etc) is a way of opening other creative doors.

What if I refuse to use pronouns, or the word "the"? What if I couldn't start sentences with a noun-verb structure? What if I omit one letter, not using any words that include that letter?

Invent a constraint and write within it. Experiment with different sorts of limitations. Afterward, journal about the experience.

Rant Redux

Revisit the rant exercise from Session 2. Try accessing different sorts of energy via a rant — complaint, plea, dismissal, rage at the injustice of the universe, etc.

What would your characters rant about? Can you scribe for them?

The Magical Writer

Session 4 — Integrating Our Inner Critic

“That character is all wrong. No one would ever talk like that. What a stupid plot twist. That sentence is completely clumsy, not to mention pretentious. In fact, this entire book sucks big time!”

Sound familiar? Let’s welcome our Inner Critic. That part of ourselves that knows us so well, and exploits every insecurity to make sure we don’t start believing that we can actually write (or sing or paint...).

Most of us don’t need to invoke our Inner Critics. They tend to hang around all the time — especially when we’re trying to create.

Maybe we’ve tried different strategies for avoiding or outwitting them — forced typing sessions, caffeine and other mind-altering substances, refusing to acknowledge our own feelings — and when all else fails, berating ourselves for paying attention to the Inner Critic in the first place.

Engaging the Shadow

When we do magical shadow work, our aim is not to avoid or suppress the shadow energy, which usually carries great gifts as well as daunting challenges, but to engage and integrate the shadow energy.

Shadow energy is not necessarily negative. One of my great shadows is flamboyance, being loud, and taking up space. I find it excruciating. For someone else, it might be unacknowledged anger or frustration trying to burst out.

As writers, we are blessed with a special kind of shadow — the Inner Critic — that nagging voice that monitors every word we write.

Like much shadow energy, the Inner Critic is actually trying to help us. It desperately wants us to make a good impression in the world and often has an acutely developed fear of being embarrassed by anything less than perfection.

Integrating Our Inner Critic

As with any shadow energy, our goal as artists is not to avoid or banish our Inner Critic, which after all is a part of us. Our task is to integrate the shadow in a way that allows us to learn, change, and be strengthened by the experience.

As we integrate this critical energy, we can learn to tap its insights without being debilitated by the nattering. Ironically, the more effectively we listen to its feedback, the less the Inner Critic will need to spew at us.

We may even find that the Inner Critic can learn to support our writing — if only in order to have more material to criticize later.

See page 2 for exercises

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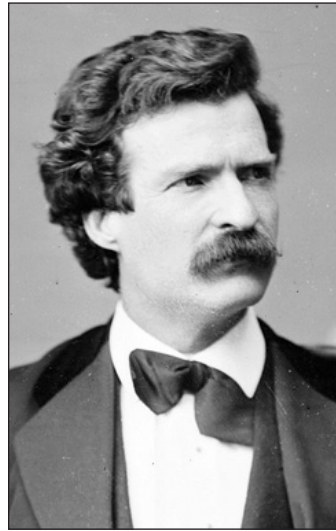
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Magical Writing Ancestor — Mark Twain, later 1800s

The Magical Writer

Exercises — Session 4

Listening Exercises

Listening to Our Inner Critic

Ideally, I want to encounter my Inner Critic on its own turf, where the voice is strong and insistent.

I could try trancing and listening, but I probably wouldn't find it in peak form.

To listen to my shadow, I may need to venture into unfriendly territory.

What if I sit down with pen in hand and really try to write something great — all the while taking note of the voices that crop up?

It's amazing how easily they arise!

Maybe I can speak them into a recorder as I write, or jot them in the margin: "That word choice is wrong. My paragraphs are too short. There's no flow. This isn't going anywhere."

Gather a half-dozen criticisms. Now make yourself trance-comfortable, with no distractions. Turn off your phone. Put on music you like. Make some tea.

Take some breaths to ground yourself. Maybe do a few mirror-affirmations. Then settle back.

Read a criticism, then close your eyes and ask: "Critic, what is it you are worried about? What is your fear for me? What would you like to see different?"

And listen.

What does your Critic want? What are the key fears? What patterns emerge?

At the end, thank your Inner Critic — and listen for possible return thanks. Our Inner Critic wants us to hear and learn, and truly wants to help our writing.

Engaging Our Critic

Talking Back to Our Critic

After you've done some listening, ask your Inner Critic to listen to you for a while. I would invite my Critic to sit at the edge of my circle.

Take a few statements that your Inner Critic likes to repeat. Print them out, so they are not in your handwriting.

Set a timer for two minutes. Read a criticism, then start spewing back — in a journal, on a keyboard, or into a recorder. Spew until the timer goes off.

When it rings, stop and shift your energy for a moment — stand up, go get a drink of water, feed the cat, etc.

Return, read the original criticism and your response. If you recorded your back-talk, jot down a few key words.

Breathe into the words a few times and acknowledge them. Now burn both pieces of paper and scatter the ashes.

Journal for a few minutes about whatever comes up.

Repeat for other criticisms.

Integrating Our Inner Critic

Consider whether you can make any commitments to your Inner Critic. If so, voice them and write them down.

Then make requests of your Critic — when and how input is welcomed. Frame this as positive statements of what you want, not what you don't want — but make the boundaries clear.

Find a way to consecrate your commitments — a ritual, a candle spell, etc.

Writing Exercises

Turn Your Critic Loose

Get a popular magazine or a paperback novel you don't care about. You'll also need a thick red marker.

Cast a circle away from your usual workspace and do this exercise within it. Invite your Inner Critic to join you.

With your Critic by your side and your red marker in hand, critique every aspect of the magazine or book. Be picky. Don't cut them any slack. Your Inner Critic will appreciate your dedication.

By the time you finish, the page(s) should be illegible. If they look funny, stick them on your wall. If they're oppressive, burn or compost them.

Then journal. Ask your Critic what they think as well, and scribe the answers.

Finally, thank your Inner Critic, devoke them, and open your circle. Avoid that space for the rest of the day.

Writing In Spite of It All

Looking in a mirror, repeat this a few times, gazing into your eyes and breathing in between: "It sometimes happens that a writer writes something really awful, and they're still completely okay."

Any laughter? Yawning? Exasperation?

Sit down and write whatever you feel like. If you're stumped, try writing one of these, and see what follows:

"If I set out to write the worst book in all history, it would be about _____."

"If I didn't care what anyone — even myself — thought, I would write _____."

The Magical Writer

Session 5 — Plot, Story, and Myth

How do we move from the stories in our hearts to a structured narrative that can sustain its energy over the course of a book?

A plot is the scaffolding that allows us to transform the raw energy of our stories into a compelling and emotionally satisfying narrative.

Plots are remarkably simple and repetitive. Christopher Booker says that all of Western literature consists of seven (later he said nine) plots. But to find this limiting is like bemoaning that all of Western music consists of just twelve musical tones. An infinite number of songs can be crafted from those twelve tones, and an infinite number of stories from a small number of plots.

Myths and Plots

Myths embody simple plots, and often share common features such as a Call, a Challenge, a Journey, a Period of Testing, an Initiation, a Climactic Struggle, and a Triumphant Return.

Myths are remarkably supple. I think of a myth as a collection of story-elements — characters, conflicts, situations, possible outcomes — which each storyteller assembles in a unique way. Homer wrote a version of the *Odyssey* — but James Joyce and the creators of *O Brother Where Art Thou* did, too. All were reworking “traditional” material.

Whether it was ancient Greek playwrights, the Roman poet Ovid, or moderns like Bulfinch and Campbell, each version is one possibility among many. None is “the” story, and every new storyteller is entitled to rework the material in their own way.

Myths as Organizing Devices

Myths and folktales can be used explicitly — think of Marion Zimmer Bradley, John Barth, or the film version of *The Iliad*. Ancient and medieval myths and legends have lost none of their power, and lesser-known tales could provide great material for modern narratives.

Myths can also be used as subtle structural patterns — Joyce’s *Ulysses* makes few explicit references to Homer’s work, yet the classical text underlies the structure of the entire novel. Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* mirrors a phantasmagoric journey to Hell, cleverly disguised as America.

Even when we don’t follow a myth so strictly, we can use mythical elements to strengthen the scaffolding of our work. Many stories will benefit from a Journey, a series of Challenges — and of course the Climactic Struggle (which may take place on a battlefield or at a formal wedding).

See page 2 for exercises

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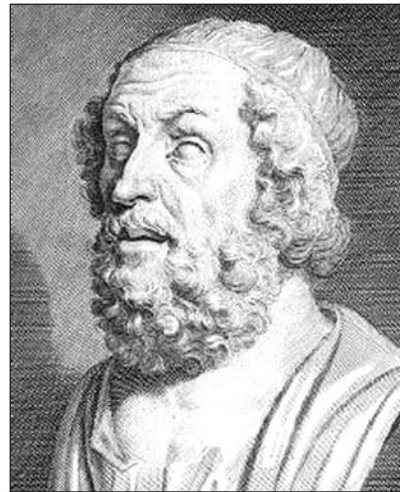
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Magical Writing Ancestor — Homer. The Homeric poems were written down c. 800 BCE.

The Magical Writer

Exercises — Session 5

Mythical Elements

Whether or not we adopt a myth as our organizing structure (hey, it worked for James Joyce!), we can strengthen our storytelling by integrating mythical elements into our plots.

A Call is a typical way to start a story — whether it is a call to a journey, a task, or an interior awakening, it is this first glimmer of awareness that sets the story in motion.

Challenges, with initial failures and a growing recognition of the need for special preparation, often lead to a decision to undertake a journey and/or seek special training. Action-adventure films often emphasize this arc.

A Journey takes the story into the wider world. Characters gain experience while meeting fresh challenges. A journey can also add color and excitement to the story — the “exotic.”

Testing and Initiation are ways of structuring conflicts and having them lead to a clear outcome. The initiation doesn't need to be formal, but a significant threshold must be crossed and acknowledged — readying the character for the ultimate test.

The Climactic Struggle brings the story-elements and characters into a final showdown — Theseus and Ariadne vs the Minotaur, Dorothy and her friends vs the Wicked Witch, etc.

The Triumphant Return can be shown (as when the princess is restored to her rightful throne amid general acclaim), or simply suggested (as when the gunfighter rides alone into the sunset amid the applause of the moviegoers).

MythCrafting

When we perform magical spells, we speak of “spellcrafting,” the art of envisioning, creating, and charging our intentions.

What if we applied the same approach with our writing — and our lives?

Think of the stories we tell ourselves about our limitations, the likelihood of failure, and the negligible impact of our actions. Can I take these disheartening tales about “how the world is” and transmute them into narratives of empowerment?

What magical tools help me tap into the stories that get buried beneath the clamor of the world? What are the roles of trance, divination, and dreamwork?

In what ways can my storycrafting support my complete emergence into the world?

Some Resources

The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters by Christopher Vogler. Based on the work of Joseph Campbell.

Shakespeare's Game by William Gibson. Dissects the Bard's plays to illustrate plot-construction. The best book I've read on plotcrafting.

Myths and Appropriation

I consider European and Mediterranean myths “fair game.” The only reservation I have about reworking myths is borrowing materials from cultures which traditionally have been exploited by my inherited European culture.

Writing Exercises

My Life as Myth

Choose a favorite myth and rework it as part of a story you are working on, or part of your autobiography.

In your story, what monsters are battled? What special skills are involved? What princes, princesses, or royal children of other genders do we meet?

Does your narrative have a Call? An Initiation? A Triumphant Return?

Transforming a Myth

Choose a myth that annoys you, and rework it in a manner that empowers you. You can reinterpret the myth, introduce new characters or other elements that transform the story, etc.

Change anything you want, but somehow keep the original myth visible.

Modern Pantheons

Create a dozen deities or other magical beings. Be sure to give them superpowers and special areas of influence (e.g., love, war, barbecuing, etc).

Use an arbitrary method — coin-toss, drawing cards, etc — to assign them places in a hierarchical pantheon or family. Draw a chart of their relations.

Once they are assigned places, what conflicts arise? Is a gender or generational rebellion taking shape? Can the top dogs retain their position? Make whatever moves you feel are needed.

Now write a short myth that explains the changes, why they had to happen, and why the world is a better place for it.

The Magical Writer

Session 6 - The Alchemy of Editing

Legend tells how Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* on an endless spool of paper, spewing forth a masterpiece in one sustained writing binge. What the legend omits is that Kerouac did a good bit of rewriting and editing before the book was printed.

Many of us carry the internalized message that if our writing (or music, or painting...) is really any good, it will flow out perfectly formed. What takes effort must be second rate and uninspired.

But consider the lessons of alchemy. The *prima materia* comes from our vision, and our draft is produced by the heat of this initial inspiration — but we still have many refining transmutations left before we reach gold.

This alchemical purification requires not only diligent and focused effort, but also times of waiting, of letting the draft “percolate” for a while before reworking it.

Magical Support for Editing

One of the more painful aspects of editing is realizing my brilliant first draft is actually flawed — and by extension, my present editing might also fall short of perfection. Talk about a buzzkill!

Magic can cushion the disappointment in several ways:

- Invoke editing allies — ask support from a favorite writer, or perhaps the many unnamed editors (often women and younger writers) who prepared others' words for the press.
- Distancing — before editing, invoke the text and speak to it as another being, not as a piece of your heart. Thank it for existing, and assure it that it is valued even as it is critiqued and rewritten. Ask the text's support in its own rewrite. Call forth its dreams.
- Visioning — take a moment before and after editing to close your eyes and envision the excellent work that you are producing. Breathe into the process of creation.
- Honor yourself. Create a short ritual to thank yourself and the creative spark of the universe for your work. I like drawing a few tarot cards as a gift to myself.

Show, Don't Tell

Imagine teaching someone about magic by having them sit and listen to a description of how it works. Why not just do it? One spell is worth a thousand words.

In editing parlance, the mantra is: “Show, don't tell.” It sounds straightforward, but it's about as simple as peeling onions. There's always another layer, and you can only do so much before you need a break.

“Show, don't tell” is an ideal to pursue, not a goal we reach. If we succeeded in showing everything, we wouldn't have a book, we'd have a guided tour of reality.

Exercises on page 2

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Jorge Luis Borges. Crafter of literary gems. D. 1986.

The Magical Writer

Exercises — Session 6

From Telling to Showing

Mark Twain says, “Don’t tell us that the old lady screamed – bring her onstage and let her scream.”

“Telling” — the narrator stating what happened, versus showing characters in action — is a convenient shorthand. “They argued about it, but didn’t reach agreement.” This is fine for a first draft.

But in the editing process, we have a chance to enliven our writing by depicting this bit of interpersonal conflict.

Here are ways we can edit our writing to make it more vivid:

- Eliminate adverbs. Adverbs are fine in first drafts, but later eliminate as many as possible. Describe body language instead of using an adverb. Show someone being petulant or infantile — don’t tell us.
- Illustrate a point with an anecdote rather than delivering information as the narrator (or having a character give a speech).
- Within the anecdote, show us what happens — don’t simply tell us the story.
- Cut unnecessary explication. Hunter S. Thompson doesn’t identify Las Vegas as Hell. He sticks to his story and lets the analogy emerge on its own.

Contrast an early novelist like Balzac, who appends moralizing summaries to his scenes to make sure we don’t miss his points. It works, but later writers have been more trusting of readers’ abilities to draw their own lessons.

Look through your writing – including nonfiction – and ask what explanations can be cut or altered so the point is made by “showing.”

Magical Editing

Try editing within magical space, invoking allies, etc. Make an offering to your Inner Critic and ask support.

Invoke your text as if it is a distinct being. Ask the draft’s support in its own rewrite.

Visioning — do a trance and envision the amazing work you are producing. Breathe into your process of creation.

Elements of Editing

Here are ideas for more magical editing:

- Set a draft aside for a while. You might enjoy reworking it once the flush of creation has passed.
- Practice editing someone else’s writing. A writers’ group can provide an opportunity for compassionate criticism. The judgment I direct at others’ writing is what I am likely to apply to my own (I think Jesus said that).
- When critiquing your own or others’ writing, use a pleasant-colored pen. Red ink looks like you are shouting. Purple is relaxing.
- Keep your comments easy to read and understand. Include a summary note at the end saying a few things you liked, and a few things to work on.
- Note positives as well as negatives. Smiley faces and exclamation points can balance critical feedback.
- When editing your own drafts, print out a clean copy. Give it wide margins, a crisp font, etc. Make it a pleasure to look at the page. Get away from your desk and enjoy reading the draft – and the opportunity to make it sharper.

Editing Exercises

Edit your Emails

Email editing is a great exercise. Short, clear emails are more likely to get read — and less likely to be misunderstood.

Editing Incipits and Finales

Put double effort into the opening and closing of scenes, essays, poems, etc.

See “Incipits” handout for opening ideas.

At scene endings, Hollywood teaches us to make quick cuts, and not to waste time wrapping up one scene before launching the next.

If you have written scenes for a novel or sections of a nonfiction book, try deleting the final sentences and see what is lost.

Cut whatever deflates the energy: characters winding down their day, wrapping up conversations, saying goodbye, etc.

If you’ve ended a scene with a joke, cut it. Nothing deflates narrative tension faster than a joke.

Cliffhangers

Where possible, end scenes with a cliffhanger: conflictual dialog, a sudden interruption, a door opening unexpectedly, etc – anything that compels the reader to read on.

Cliffhangers work for nonfiction, too. How can a chapter end in such a way that the reader must read the opening of the next chapter? What questions can be raised to intrigue the reader with the next material you are offering? What mysteries can be mined for suspense?

The Magical Writer

Session 7 — Taking Writing Into the World

Can writing change the world? Apparently — since it's on account of my predecessors' writings that I was inspired to take up the practice myself. My writing might similarly inspire others to write — if only because they say, "I can do better than that!"

But in a more direct way, when I shape a new narrative or give voice to a new lyric or poem, I'm challenging and changing the way we see the world. Much of our experience of "the world" involves narratives about what life adds up to, what it means to succeed or fail, what is worth striving for...

These sorts of meanings are intimately bound up with the stories we tell ourselves about "how the world is."

When I craft a narrative, I am presenting a new way that the world might be experienced. Even if I write about the Xaxathanians on the planet Xaxathanathax, I am describing ways that sentient beings can interact. And unavoidably, my writing carries a moral message — some of these ways of being in the world are shown as better than others.

To write is to insist that the world — and our stories and meanings about it — are valuable. That they have meaning beyond the moment. That they are worth writing down.

A Vision of a New Culture

Within Reclaiming, writers have a special task. Besides sending well-crafted emails, I mean.

Reclaiming's mission statement — one of the few consensed expressions of our path — says that our aim is "to bring to birth a vision of a new culture."

All of Reclaiming, and many people and groups beyond, are participating in shaping this vision. But it's up to us to give it narrative expression, and to carry that vision into the wider world.

Beyond Isolation

As we prepare to take our writing into the world, it's more important than ever to step out of the usual isolation of our craft. From drafting to editing to publishing, writers can join together to make our work more accessible and to make the process more humane.

We can also take advantage of existing networks to share our writing — within Reclaiming alone we have several e-lists, a magazine, and multiple websites. Add other networks you are part of, and through grassroots outlets alone you can reach hundreds or even thousands of readers.

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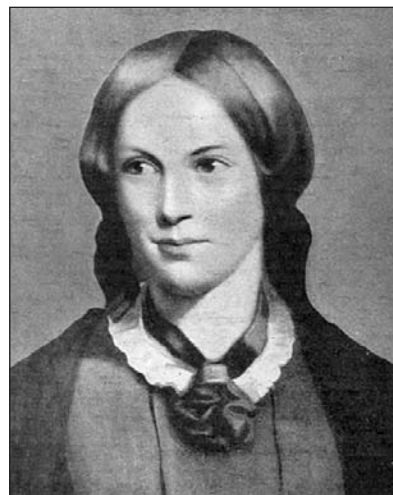
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*Magical Writing Ancestor — Charlotte Brontë.
Wrote and published in the early 1800s.*

The Magical Writer

Exercises — Session 7

Into the World

Writers' Groups

A peer writing group is great for support and for constructive criticism. Over time we can develop connections with other writers who understand our goals and can help us pursue them.

Some groups meet in order to write together. Some read aloud. Others circulate writings and meet for feedback and encouragement. Still others work together on marketing, seeking agents, and the business of writing.

Two early tasks for a group are defining its purpose and reaching agreements about how feedback will be given and received. Learning to balance positive and critical observations are important parts of our collective work.

What about an online writing circle? Maybe. But I think it sacrifices energetic exchange compared to meeting in person. I'd also be wary of offering critical feedback without being present with the writer. Sensing energy is a big part of this work.

Sharing Writing – Sharing with other writers, with clear agreements about feedback, is very rewarding. Sharing writing with friends and family – whether or not you are writing about them – is seldom satisfying. If you need their input, interview them and share the transcript. If they want to see the fictionalized version, let them ask.

The web makes it possible to share short writing via elists, fansites, and news groups. The plus side is new and accessible avenues to reach readers.

The downside is the temptation to share under-edited material. Can you create a writers' group to help you decide when a piece is ready to publish?

Reading Aloud – Poets and lyricists are accustomed to this opportunity. Maybe we need prose slams.

Some writers' groups share work aloud. Before I read aloud, I practice with a recorder, often seeing ways to sharpen the prose, drop extra clauses, etc. When I read to others, I can sense whether I am holding their attention, whether humor works, or whether shocking material actually shocks.

Publishing Options

Today, publishing means anything from a hardbound volume to a post on an elist.

Still, most of us working on narratives have a dream of “publishing a book.” It's an exciting prospect, personally rewarding when it happens — and it is also just the beginning of a huge amount of marketing work.

A handful of writers actually make their living this way. Most strive to break even after their expenses. Some publish one book and swear they will never do it again.

Don't underestimate the possibilities of elists, fansites, etc. This may be an ideal audience for testing your writing.

If it's a book you want, a good guide to the terrain is *The Shortest Distance Between You and a Published Book*, which discusses the pros and cons of self-publishing, finding an agent, and marketing your own work directly to publishers. A great guide for discernment.

Writing Exercises

Marketing Exercises

Describe your book as a conjuncture of two well-known works: “It's like *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* meets *Whinnie-the-Pooh*.”

What are a few books that yours resembles? What one thing makes your book different than all the others?

Write a description of your book in one paragraph. Hone it to a single sentence.

Book Fairs

Attend a big-city book fair where publishers will have displays of current titles. Look at the sorts of books getting published — does it give you any ideas?

Look for companies publishing books similar to yours. Take the opportunity to ask questions about what direction the publisher is moving. If you see a book similar to yours, ask how it is selling, and what might have worked better. Keep your ears tuned in to what the publisher does *not* like.

Book fairs also include workshops and discussions that can help with the writing craft as well as inspire you with real-life stories of the writers' trade.

Narrative Playback

Read a passage of your writing aloud into a recorder. Play it back (use headphones to get better quality). What editing possibilities do you see? Are there places where the pacing feels rushed? Does the dialog sound real?

The Magical Writer

The Craft: Creating Engaging Incipits

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

That may be the most famous incipit in English literature. Although “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” might rival it. And let’s not forget “It was a dark and stormy night.”

Incipits are the opening sentence, paragraph, or scene of a work. Poems have incipits: “Listen, my children, and you shall hear...” So do nonfiction works, whether it’s a crisp thesis sentence or a bitingly relevant anecdote.

Incipits are the first thing most readers encounter. A good incipit sentence can lead people to read a bit more of your book, giving you valuable time to engage them in other ways. A lackluster incipit encourages us to pick up a different book as we’re browsing our friend’s bookshelf.

But although they are the beginning of the readers’ experience, incipits are not necessarily the first thing the writer produces.

Any writing, from action narratives to academic essays, benefits from returning after completing the first draft and reworking the incipit.

Adding an illustrative anecdote at the top of an essay gives the reader a different way of engaging than a thesis sentence does.

Opening with a question instead of a statement encourages readers to participate rather than simply absorb.

Starting with a mysterious, unexplained statement leads some readers onward.

Mystery and Incipits

In some ways, almost any writing is a mystery. Even in a straightforward news story we are first told simply what happened, then filled in on details, causation, consequences, etc. Skillful writers hold back key pieces to draw us forward.

Some mysteries revolve around “whodunit and why.” But in many cases — for example, history books — the reader already knows the outcome of the narrative. The key question is: How did the matter unwind?

Nonfiction writing can benefit from “mystery.” Opening with an anecdote that engages the reader but is not fully explained can raise questions — “promises,” as they are called in another handout.

Studying the techniques of mysteries can sharpen any type of writing.

Exercises on page 2

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Dante Alighieri, c. 1300.

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Incipits

Incipit Research

Bookstore Research

Visit a bookstore and browse different types of books and magazines, studying their opening sentences and paragraphs. Which ones engage you? Did any lead you to read the first page, or make you want to flip through the book?

Browse the literature shelves and read the opening sentences of “great novels.” Compare older works with contemporary fiction. Contrast art novels with best sellers.

Look at catalogues, encyclopedia entries, cookbooks, and other “non-narrative” types of writing. What tricks do they use to enliven dry material?

Movie Incipits

In “ye olden dayes,” film makers counted on their audience staying in their seats. Once we’d traveled to the theater and paid for our ticket, a movie had to be pretty bad for people to walk out. Incipits could be leisurely. Acting credits could scroll while people settled into their seats. Milieu and context could be established by slow camera pans.

In the Netflix era, the pressure is on movies to grab our attention, or we’ll move on to the next offering. Only established auteurs like Merchant Ivory can start slowly and trust they will hold their audience.

Television has always faced this dilemma — if the show does not yet have a steady audience (such as soap operas do), its credo must be “dazzle or die.”

This leads, even in well-written dramas such as *The Sopranos*, to highly

artificial plot twists and incessant interpersonal conflict to keep viewers from changing channels. (Note how cliff-hangers are used to keep us from channel surfing at commercial breaks.)

Contrast the incipits of older films — *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance — with the opening scene of a television series like *Desperate Housewives*.

Research — think of a film that unexpectedly engaged you from the start. Watch the beginning again, considering things like the narrative energy map, what information is shown and what is held back, what promises and mysteries are planted, and generally how the filmmakers engaged you so well.

If you have Netflix, HBO, or other inexpensive access to films (like your friends’ video shelves), watch the incipits of genres you don’t usually watch. What can we learn from horror films, or documentaries? What about a foreign film where we turn off the subtitles and study the cinematic energy?

Writing Exercises

Incipit Rewrites

Write five significantly different versions of the opening sentence/paragraph of an essay, poem, or a chapter of a fictional work. Try these variations:

- Change the actual content of your opening — show something different, use different imagery, etc.
- Change the vocabulary — try florid writing, staid prose, etc.
- Open with a character speaking — try opening with dialog without identify-

ing the speaker. Can you engage readers simply by the dialog?

- Open with instant drama or conflict (a motorcycle careens down a narrow road, or two characters argue vehemently).
- Open with an anecdote, even if you invent one for this purpose. Consider using a fable, a news item, a personal anecdote, a historical incident, a joke...
- Start a poem or fictional work with a thesis sentence (consider how “It was the best of times...” is a thesis sentence for the entire book.)

Honing the Incipit

Once you have some possible incipits, let them sit for a day or a week. Come back and see which one jumps out. Set others aside for later chapters, essays, poems...

Take your favorite and start to hone it. Can you eliminate words or clauses without losing the essential image?

Look at the vocabulary and word order. Can you sharpen the imagery without adding to the word count?

Consider the rhythm of your opening paragraph. Does the rhythm reinforce or contradict the mood you want to create?

Short sentences feel breathless. Suspense mounts. Periods propel us forward.

Longer sentences, with commas, subordinate clauses, and multiple ways of making the same point, often including asides such as this clause, create a more laconic feel.

Eliminate adverbs. If the dialog is vivid, the adverb is usually superfluous. If a character says, “You blithering idiot!” the adverb “angrily” can be omitted. Hone opening dialog to eliminate the need for adverbs.

The Magical Writer

The Craft: Promises and Cliffhangers

A promise is an open question that readers will want and expect to have answered. They're called "promises" because the reader trusts they will be answered.

A promise can be anything from "Where is the main character?" to "What's this weird thing they keep talking about?" to "Who killed the murder victim?"

Early promises are often small, and may be answered within a few pages. But some promises will remain open for the entire book.

When we offer the reader a promise, we eventually have to redeem it. If we want to hold our audience, before we answer one promise, we need to have planted another. The best answer raises more questions than it resolves.

Cliffhangers are a subcategory of promises which are placed at the very end of a scene. Their function is to keep us from putting the book down when we finish the chapter. Cliffhangers are often quite simple — a careening motorcycle, the sudden appearance of a character, or even abrupt and unresolved dialog.

The Da Vinci Code is a good example of the use of promises and cliffhangers.

(A) Every scene — every three to five pages — ends with a cliffhanger, making it impossible to put the book down.

(B) A major promise rises early and carries us through half of the book — what's with the Grail and Mary Magdalene? (Note that the author didn't invent this material — he tapped into ideas that many people were pondering.)

(C) The key promise, as with most mysteries, is "whodunit and why?" By the time the promise about the Grail is answered, we are hooked into the question of who is behind the whole scheme.

The Key Promise

The key promise says: "At the climax of this book, you will finally figure this out."

It's often quite simple. In a mystery, it's "whodunit and why?" In a romance, it's "will they live happily ever after?" In a family drama, it's "what's really going on beneath the surface?"

The key promise is not the "point" of the book. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the Grail material may be the theme and purpose of the book, but it is not the key promise — the Grail issues are explained and resolved well before the climax. The key promise is a more traditional "whodunit and why?"

A strong key promise carries the plot forward while you develop your characters and share the "content" of the book.

Exercises on page 2

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Hildegard von Bingen, from her "Liber Scivias," c. 1150 AD.

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Promises

Using Promises

Ways to Use Promises

Promises are a plot-structuring device used in many types of writing, from novels to history books to textbooks.

Promises used in narratives are often quite simple and familiar: “Whodunit?” or “Will X fall in love with Y?” It’s how we deploy them that gives our story its unique flavor.

Early on, set as many promises as possible. Introduce characters a bit at a time. Drop hints about the milieu — especially about conflict or problems — and leave the explanation for later.

Mention things the reader will wonder about, and wait a bit before explaining. For instance:

- Keep a main character offstage for a while, but mention their name.
- Show a conflict between characters, without elaborating till later.
- Mention unusual aspects of the milieu or characters — explain later.

Answering Promises

- Before one promise is resolved, plant two more.
- Avoid ending a chapter or scene on a resolved note — use cliffhangers.
- Find ways to weave and overlap, so answering one promise raises new questions.
- By mid-story, smaller promises are answered, and major ones are coalescing around the “key promise.”

Using Promises

What Promises Are Good For

- Keeping readers engaged while the story builds momentum — keep reader from putting the book down.
- Allowing author to feed info under cover of story-drama — give partial info, leaving some open questions that aren’t explained till later.
- Conveying non-plot material — the book’s “content.” Plant some promises, then do exposition. Do the exposition a bit at a time. While you give some info, raise new questions for the reader.

Villain Taunts Protagonist

A classic use of promises is the villain taunting the protagonist at the end of a mystery. The detective is tied to a chair — but before being executed they are forced to listen to the villain gloat about their brilliant crime.

The promise is simple — how will the detective escape? This one promise allows the author to resolve many of the earlier promises, and wrap up many loose ends, while maintaining dramatic tension.

Assuming we care about the characters, or at least want a big chase scene, this simple promise holds our attention while the villain engages in a long-winded exposition, explaining step by step how everything happened, what the various clues really meant, and how the entire story fits together.

Probably they will leave out one or two important details, saving them till the end of the book — so that we don’t put it down till after the escape scene.

Writing Exercises

List o’ Promises

List a bunch of promises that could be part of your story, from small details to overarching ones.

Is one of these the key promise? Remember — the key promise is not usually the theme of the book, but a simpler question such as “whodunit?”

Which promises from your list could be placed in early scenes? What is the first promise you will offer? (It can be simple, so long as you don’t answer it before you plant a couple more promises.)

Find one promise which, when answered, will raise more questions. (For example: Fred feels estranged from his father, then learns that he was a love-child, which raises the new question of who his biological father really was.)

Book Jacket Promise

What mysterious question will you put on the book jacket so that people are compelled to pick your book up?

Sketch some ideas, then hone them to one pithy sentence.

The Villain’s Speech

Try writing the “villain’s final speech” for your book — even if there isn’t a villain. Make up a climactic scene where the protagonist is forced to sit and listen to an explanation of all of the mysteries and loose ends of your book.

What details do you hold back even now, and only answer at the very end?

How does the protagonist finally escape? (Stretch this idea to suit other genres.)

The Magical Writer

The Craft: Five-Act Structures

Breaking a story into distinct “acts” helps narrow down the work that needs to be done at a given moment, and gives us a way to situate ourselves in the overall plot.

I like working with five acts, based on Shakespeare’s plays. Screenwriters sometimes speak of a three-act structure, which is similar but less nuanced. Here is an outline of a five-act structure, and what I aim to accomplish in each act:

Act I — Introduce characters, milieu, and early plot promises and complications.

- Tip — introduce characters amid early conflict while showing the milieu — try to have every paragraph move all three aspects — character, conflict, and milieu — forward. Aim to have most characters introduced by the end of Act I or early Act II.

Act II — Interweave characters, introduce more promises and subplots — increase the complexity of the plot.

- Example — in a mystery novel, a detective has two cases — the murder of her beloved Aunt Beulah and the theft of the royal diamonds. They are separate cases and make competing demands on the protagonist’s time and attention.

Act III — Increasing complexity. At end of Act III comes the *pivot* — the moment when separate plot strands clearly and dramatically coalesce, and the protagonist gets dragged deeper into the plot (see page two for more on pivots).

- Example — the pivot is when the detective realizes that the murder of Aunt Gertrude is connected with the theft of the royal diamonds — and that Aunt Gertrude may in fact have been the mastermind. The separate plots come crashing together.

- Often, at the pivot, the detective and reader will have a theory about “whodunit” (modify this concept for other genres) — but this obvious solution will be refuted in Act IV.

Act IV — The now-unified plot, which momentarily seemed clearer, gets much muddier — at the end of Act IV, we should be at maximum confusion.

- Example — in a mystery, the detective enters Act IV with a leading suspect — but soon the suspect winds up dead, throwing the detective’s theory into confusion.

Act V — Climax and denouement — all plot strands and characters come together. A “set piece” such as a wedding (see separate handout) can bring everyone together for the grand finale. Preserve suspense to the end by keeping some plot threads and promises open. Once all significant questions are answered, the story is over.

- Example — in a mystery, even when we know “whodunit,” keep the final resolution veiled as long as possible. A classic tactic is the villain, finally unmasked, taunting the captive detective. The detective is about to be executed — but first the villain must gloatingly explicate the entire mystery, clue by clue. By maintaining suspense about how the villain finally will be thwarted, the author can wrap up other promises without losing our attention.

Exercises on page 2

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe, c. 1800.

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Structure

Elements of Plot

Once you've developed your overarching plot, you can use devices such as subplots, sub-climaxes, and a mid-story pivot to give texture to the narrative.

Subplots and sub-climaxes

Within the overarching plot, each of these acts might be broken into any number of shorter chapters — *The Da Vinci Code* uses nearly a hundred chapters (each ending with a cliff-hanger) to maintain breakneck pacing. Yet the book as a whole maps neatly as a five-act structure.

Each chapter, scene, or subsection of a book has its own plot arc. You can place sub-climaxes along the way as some of the lesser promises and mysteries are cleared up.

For example, in *Casablanca*, we have a sub-climax when Ilsa pulls a gun on Rick midway through the movie. The subplot of their old relationship comes to a climax here, and has its own denouement as they come together for a soft-focus kiss. Luckily for the movie, many promises and plot threads remain open, and instead of defusing the tension, the kiss is a pivot that drags Ilsa and Rick deeper into the plot.

These sub-climaxes give nuance and shape to the plot arc, carrying our emotions up and down like a roller coaster on the way to the ultimate payoff.

Note — Plot structures exist to help us craft our narratives, not to shackle us. Adapt these structures to suit your own needs. Use them when they support your work, and discard them if they interfere.

The Pivot

Many novels and screenplays have a mid-plot pivot — a moment when the entire plot suddenly takes a sharp and clarifying turn. Specifically:

Separate subplots come together.

In *Dirty Dancing*, the two subplots involving Penny's abortion and Baby's flirtation with Johnny crash together when Baby is forced to wake her father (a doctor) in the middle of the night. His response — humane yet patriarchal — unifies these subplots while greatly raising the stakes for the young people.

The protagonist is pulled more deeply into the story. Early in *Casablanca*, Rick is a jaded, alcoholic voyeur. But when the desperate Ilsa pulls a gun on him, followed by their first kiss in years, Rick is wrenched into the thick of the danger.

The characters' core challenges are articulated, and the conflicts are internalized. As the subplots merge, the protagonists are forced to step up not just to a difficult situation, but to their own deepest challenges. As the conflict is internalized, they are forced to "come of age," a theme of many Hollywood films. In *Casablanca*, once Rick and Ilsa kiss, he is forced to confront not just the Nazi authorities, but also his own bleakest shadows — he must make decisions he has long evaded.

Everything is on the table. All major characters should be onstage before this point, and all conflicts and subplots introduced. The pivot brings out the deep conflicts of the story and shows how the various subplots are actually all part of one overarching challenge.

Writing Exercises

Plot Mapping

Re-watch a favorite film and identify the major parts of the plot:

- When and how were key characters introduced? Were characters introduced amid conflict or as part of a milieu?
- At what point did you understand the major theme of the plot (presuming you didn't know it beforehand)?
- Can you identify a mid-story pivot, where subplots merge and protagonists are pulled more deeply into the story? Can you name one key scene where this happens?
- When is the plot's major conflict clear? Is this before or after the pivot?

Conflict Inventory

In a story you are writing, or using your autobiography, make a list of several major conflicts or challenges to cover.

What is the common thread of these conflicts and challenges? Can you identify the core conflict or challenge?

Can you open the narrative with separate conflicts and challenges that later merge toward the common thread? Can you use the subplots to maintain interest, letting the core conflict emerge slowly?

Can you envision a dramatic pivot in which the subplots will come together? What might trigger this synthesis? Is it a sudden discovery? A dying person's revelation? A seemingly minor conflict that suddenly escalates and lays bare a core tension? (Notice the cliff-hanger possibilities here.)

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Creating Vibrant Characters

Mark Twain said that the difficulty of writing fiction is that it has to be plausible.

When I base characters on people I know, I know that their quirks and contradictions are “realistic.” When I create characters from scratch, I lose this support. Cleverly contrived contradictions sometimes make for unbelievable characters.

What makes a fictional character come to life? What makes Don Quixote so memorable? Why are we so invested in Elizabeth Bennet’s marital prospects? Why do we have nightmares (or fantasies) about the Wicked Witch of the West?

Part of it is unique and ineffable. Quixote lives because Cervantes poured his life experience into the character.

But much about writing characters can be learned and practiced. Austen’s characters come partly from her unique inspiration, but they also live because she crafted them so carefully, honing perfect exemplars of her world.

There are many resources and handbooks for writing characters. I learned a lot by reading essays on the psychology of Shakespeare’s characters. Studying how the Bard presents Hamlet or Lady Macbeth teaches us how to construct complex characters scene by scene.

Character Tips

- **Believable contradictions** — a pacifist who loves ice hockey, a teacher who hates kids, a vegetarian who craves barbecued ribs – whatever makes characters less stable and predictable while remaining plausible.
- **Meaningful contradictions** — not just clever juxtapositions, but character-contradictions that matter in the plot. How must a character eventually choose between conflicting desires and demands brought about by these contradictions?
- **Challenge/failure/struggle/success** — the character is challenged and fails, and must work to gain the skills and power to succeed. Some of this may be backstory — when we meet Rick in *Casablanca*, he is a bitter alcoholic. The challenge and failure are behind him, and the screenplay concerns a reawakening of the challenge, new struggles, and ultimate success. Characters who parade from one success to the next — Hercules, for instance, or Superman — make for tedious stories.
- **Irony** — can you get a bit of distance and gently portray the character’s foibles? Can you help us laugh at the character while still sympathizing? This device is used in romantic comedies, where puffed up egos are deflated, but all ends happily ever after. Kafka, too, builds comic effects on character-irony – the increasing distance between what the protagonist believes and what the reader perceives.

See page 2 for exercises

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*Magical Writing Ancestor — Jane Austen.
Wrote and published in the early 1800s. Based
on a drawing by her sister Cassandra.*

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Characters

Living Dialog

Fiction Versus Real Life

Dialog captures characters on the fly. Instead of telling us what characters think, show them arguing, analyzing, cajoling, misunderstanding, etc.

Dialog can enliven the “content” of a narrative. In my action-adventure novel about the discovery of a new species of garden ant, I can write scintillating exchanges between rival entomologists to bring life to what might otherwise be dry material.

Fictional dialog is a much-edited version of real life, as working from interviews reveals. In real life, we often speak at length, then listen as someone responds for a while. On the page, three or four sentences can seem like full expression. Anything more looks like a lecture disguised as dialog.

Break up lengthy “speeches” by having other characters ask questions or assert a differing view. The sharper the disagreement, the livelier the material.

Exception — when a “speech” is in answer to long-awaited questions and promises. Midway through *The Da Vinci Code*, we wade through pages of pseudo-dialog because it answers questions about the relationship of the Grail, Mary Magdalene, and the Vatican.

Similarly, we allow the villain to taunt the detective at length near the end of a mystery novel, so long as we are getting explanations of the clues and mysteries that have unfolded beforehand.

But aside from these payoff scenes, aim for short, crisp exchanges.

Character Studies

Study Favorite Characters

Think of a few favorite characters from books and film.

- What makes you like each character? What surprises you about liking them?
- What is their mission or chief desire?
- What are the character’s internal contradictions? Why are these plausible?
- What gets in the way of fulfilling the mission or desire? How do the character’s contradictions figure in?

Dirty Dancing Lessons

Watch the original *Dirty Dancing* and track the two main romantic leads, who are basically confident young people constrained by an adult world.

Watch how each character’s internal contradictions — their unique, half-unconscious doubts and hesitations vis-a-vis the adults — interweave and nearly ruin their relationship late in the film.

Only when each has separately stood up to the adult authorities can they clear the way for their own love.

In Search of Oz

In *The Wizard of Oz*, what is Dorothy’s foremost aim, and what internal dynamic is getting in the way? (Remember what Glinda says near the end: “You knew it all along...”)

What are the personal goals of the three companions, and how do these interweave with Dorothy’s goal? Why is the journey necessary, if the characters “knew it all along”?

Writing Exercises

Character Tarot Readings

Do a reading about a character. Try a general reading (past-present-future, perhaps) — and then ask specific questions, drawing one or more cards for each. At the end, look at all of the cards and see if any patterns emerge.

Do a tarot reading *for* a character. Try invoking the character and listening — what questions do you hear coming from the character? Can you give the character a reading in response to their own questions?

Thought — tarot cards don’t contain answers, but are a way of stimulating our imagination. Mary Greer says: The cards aren’t magical — the magic is in you.

Character Rants

Write a rant about anything on your mind. Take five minutes and just spew, with no regard for linearity or coherence.

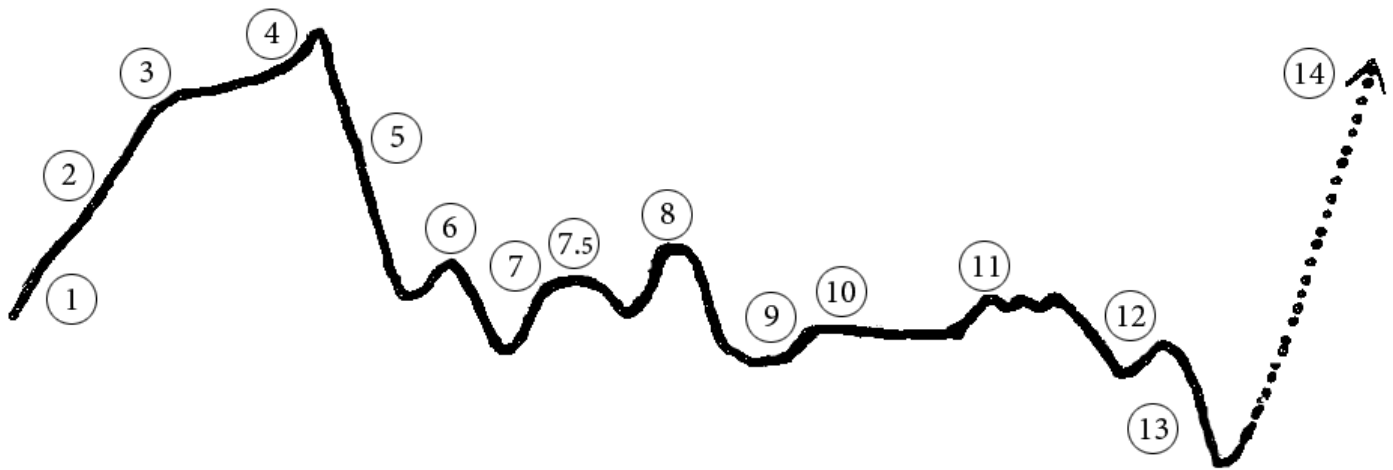
Now rework the material as part of a character. Is the rant delivered as dialog? An interior monologue? Where does it take place? What sets it off? Does anyone respond?

Character Backstory

Write a fact sheet telling where the character was born and has lived, what schools they attended, etc. What are their favorite flavors of ice cream? What is their recurring dream? What secrets do they tell no one?

Write an anecdote starring the character.

Narrative Energy in Casablanca



The chart shows the flow of narrative energy during the first ten minutes of the action of *Casablanca*, beginning from the point the radio announcer speaks.

Note how the energy rises rapidly for a couple of minutes, up to the point that the suspect is shot in the street. After that, the tension falls off quickly, as the film begins feeding us background information (exposition).

Several small “bumps” are added to keep the energy from falling too quickly.

KEY

- 1 Radio - “German couriers murdered, murderers heading to Casablanca”
- 2 Wide-screen of police roundup, melee
- 3 Close-up interrogation of a suspect
- 4 Suspect runs, cops shoot him
- 5 Blasé talk by rich diners -- *major retrenchment of energy*
- 6 Sleazy guy: “Be on guard - vultures everywhere”
- 7 Rich diner realizes his pocket has been picked -- *jump in tension*
- 7.5 Plane flies overhead, everyone watches -- “Maybe tomorrow we’ll be on that plane”
- 8 Germans arrive, Major Strasser -- Heil! -- *jump in tension*
- 9 “Rick” -- first mention -- implies he is in trouble with Germans -- *jump in tension*
- 10 Club, music -- *holds steady for a short while, but then would drop*
- 11 Shady dealings -- *keep tension afloat*
- 12 More info re Rick -- *keep tension afloat*
- 13 Rick appears first time / Ugarte enters / Conflict with banker -- *jump in tension*
- 14 Ugarte arrested

Calliope — muse of epic poetry

Clio — muse of history

Erato — muse of love poetry

Euterpe — muse of music

Melpomene — muse of tragedy

Polyhymnia — muse of sacred poetry

Terpsichore — muse of dance

Thalia — muse of comedy

Urania — the muse of astronomy