***Make-Believe:***

***A Classroom Guide to Writing Fiction***

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***Introduction***

A few days after we moved our sons (Owen, 5, and James, 3) to Pennsylvania, my wife Beth had to run an errand and I worked on unpacking while the boys played in the basement, which was a source of real wonder as such things didn’t exist in Calcasieu Parish. After a bit they got hungry and sought me out upstairs and following a wildly successful lunch of dino chicken nuggets, I decided we’d earned a little TV time. We all collapsed on the couch, and I found a movie on that Owen and I had seen before, *Kung Fu Panda 2.* Owen was a little bored and I was mostly zoning out, numb with exhaustion from the cross-country trek and the seemingly endless stacks of moving boxes, plus a bout of insomnia. James seemed engaged, and it was good to hear him giggling. All was right enough with the world.

I didn’t exactly fall asleep, but at best I was only half awake, when the slick CGI graphics gave way to old school cartoon animation as part of a flashback. We had slipped into the main character Po’s mind, and we witnessed his childhood village being invaded by growling warthog beasts with barbed spears. They set fire to the straw huts and carried baby Po away from his mother despite his tearful protests. Owen has already viewed this scene and was following absent-mindedly. I found myself curious about the artistic choice to use vintage animation, and I wondered if they had to track down aging illustrators to do the job. As for James, well, he began to scream.

I love language but am keenly aware of its limitations, so trust me when I tell you “scream” does not do justice to the sound erupting from my three-year old’s mouth. Like some organic air raid siren it rose and fell, crescendoing into piercing peaks and driving sonic spikes into my ears and Owen’s too. “James!” Owen yelled, grabbing the remote and pumping up the volume. Not to be outdone, remarkably James amplified his cry. Momentarily my mind flashed to those superheroes with mutated vocal cords able to destroy matter with their banshee wails. To spare Owen and perhaps reset James, I scooped him up and evacuated to the car port, home to a host of taped up moving boxes as well as a couch that didn’t fit in our new home.

Being outside brought James no comfort, nor did my attempts to calm him. Patting his back I said, “Breath buddy. You’re okay. Everything’s alright. I got you.” I found it unlikely he could even hear me, given the ferocity of his cries. If you’ve had kids, you know this Def Con One outburst: eyes scrunched close, face reddened, tears flowing, lips quivering, the deep sobs and choked-in gasps of breath making you think the child might actually pass out from lack of oxygen.

It’s true I thought of the neighbors and the impression I was making. Perhaps word of the outburst would get back to my wife. I’d be branded a negligent dad. While these notions bounced around my head and I continued my feeble attempts to console my infant son, James’s hollering was echoing in the car port, producing a sort of vertigo/nausea in me. Dizzy with dread, I reached the end of my rope.

I am not proud of how I acted next. Quite the opposite. I lost myself and am embarrassed by it. But in frustration I abruptly shifted James from my arms to a standing position, knelt before him, took his shoulders in my hands firmly and shouted, “Enough!”

His crying halted. He blinked back tears, choked a few half sobs. His chest heaved.

“No more!” I ordered. “You’re a big boy. You don’t have to cry like that. You know it’s just a movie. You know it’s make-believe and not real!”

My son sniffled a bit, considered what I’d said. He took a normal breath. And then James looked at me and said, “I know it’s make-believe. But how I feel is real.”

At that point in my life, I’d been studying narrative theory seriously for two decades. I’d directed a graduate program in creative writing and was about to publish my fourth novel. But James’s words struck me like a bolt from Olympus. I was devastated, and I took him in my arms and apologized.

Upon reflection, his reaction doesn’t seem at all extreme to me. He was a child uprooted from the life he knew, in an unfamiliar land, and now, at a time when he wasn’t with his mom, he had formed an empathetic bond with a baby cartoon panda. When Po lost his mom, James tapped into some sense of what that would feel like, and the flood gates opened. My son had spoken a remarkable truth—*How I feel is real*--and I should’ve known better.

“Make-believe,” that phrase I used to try to convince him to stop, should’ve been another clue. When we pretend or imagine, we’re overtly aware that the reality we’re inhabiting is a false one, a masquerade. But when you make-believe, you’re mesmerizing yourself into an altered state, once removed from your actual reality. You’re trying to believe in something you know to be unreal. You’re transporting yourself to a fantasy realm that has the potential to generate emotions as strong, or even stronger, than your ordinary existence. This is what James taught me that hot July afternoon in our car port, and honestly, it’s at the heart of everything I’ve got to share in the rest of this book.

***Chapter One: What Does Art Do?***

At the most fundamental level, art can be seen as a means of expression and communication. The inspired artist feels something (an emotion) or conceives something (an idea or belief) and is possessed by a powerful compulsion to transform that from a series of electrical impulses in their mind to some other medium—a song, a sculpture, dance, or a poem, etc. I’m reminded of the great wisdom of British novelist E.M. Forester, who asked, “How do I know what I think till I see what I write?” While many artists employ various forms of preplanning, most that I’ve met share that the experience of creating the art actually brings clarity to their initial inspiration. Many artists create first to understand, to satisfy that initial urge of self-expression.

For example, I once began a novel with a character facing the question, “What does one do when the life they expected to have is no longer an option?” No surprise, this came from some issues I was faced with in my own life, and some feelings of loss and sadness. Over the course of years, writing about those characters crystallized my own personal response to that question. My answer is about 80,000 words. (But honestly, it took me another book to really get at it.)

A painter like Jackson Pollock added colors and textures until the canvas in from of him reflected some inner state. He expressed his emotion onto the painting. Once the painting became a visual representation of what he was feeling, he stopped. Jazz musicians like Keith Jarrett find improvisation sometimes is the best way to unlock their feeling (take half an hour sometime to research the origins of the miracle that is his Kohn concert.) Many artists find real satisfaction in this simple act of rendering—seeing what they are feeling reflected in their medium--but thinking of art as solely self-expression is, to my mind, limiting. No, good art also communicates, which means the expression is one that tends to evoke a somewhat similar (but never exactly the same) reaction or response in a thoughtful reader (or viewer or audience member). That is, the artist doesn’t just come to a better understanding of that initial conceptional impulse, they capture in a way that can be shared with others. Art conveys. In the same way a conveyor belt moves luggage, or a truck conveys precious cargo, art moves meaning from the mind of the creator to the mind of the listener/reader. The cargo is some sliver of the artist’s inner essence. When we feel ourselves in the presence of someone else’s intimate experiences, it’s a kind of communion, a profound sharing.

A fair question for you as developing writers is this: What are you hoping to convey? Don’t worry if you can’t craft a thesis about your art. Indeed that might be inhibiting. But if you have no idea what sort of reaction you might hope for in a reader, I think you’re abdicating part a key aspect of your responsibility. It’s fine if you’re not sure when you get started, but before you give someone else a draft to review, you should at least have some sense of what you’re hoping they get from it, the experience you hope they have.

It occurs to me that a reader might be seeing a contradiction in what I’m proposing--that the reader is meant to “get” something but the artist might not be able to articulate what that is, exactly and precisely. In fact, this is not a contradiction but a result of art’s inherent complexity. Looking at communication that is not art may illuminate this.

What does this sign communicate?



Courtesy: Unsplash

As every driver knows, you need to bring your vehicle to a halt when you approach this. The meaning is indisputable. Similarly, if you encounter a mathematical equation like this:

*5 + 6 = 11*

you know what it means because you can identify the symbols and know exactly what they represent. (I know both these examples seem obvious but consider someone who doesn’t speak English or isn’t familiar with Arabic numerals. There’s a code here, and it’s one you know, so the meaning is instantly transferred and understood.)

In all sorts of writing, the same thing is going on. From a simple sentence like, “The capitol of Pennsylvania is Harrisburg” to a recipe for peach cobbler to a set of technical instructions on how to update a website.

The crucial distinction is that in these non-art forms of communication, the outcome is meant to be precisely the same. There’s no reasonable dispute possible regarding the creator’s intention. The reader isn’t being called upon to supply subjective interpretation, and therefor everyone’s “takeaway” should be the same. Indeed, subjective interpretation leads to failure. “5” means five. Half a cup of milk means half a cup of milk. If you add two cups of beer instead, you’re going to get a very different result (and here, perhaps, we’ve stumbled across the innovative ways cooking can be artistic, but you get my meaning).

What I’m hammering away at here is that a key element of art is the necessity of interpretation. Unlike many kinds of communication, art invites the readers to assist in the creation of meaning. Because of this, there may be many valid responses to a work of art, based on the background, biases, and expectations of each viewer. This doesn’t mean that all responses are equally valid, as sometimes a reader can bring too much of themselves to the interaction and crowd the work.

Whatever the case, art demands subjective interpretation, not simple objective translation.

I do think it possible that an art object achieves more than the artist is consciously aware of, or even able to articulate, so I’m a tad suspicious of the notion of the author’s absolute intention. I’ll confess I’m not a big fan of the little notes that accompany paintings in museum if reading them is necessary to understand the piece. If it adds depths or insight, great, but if it’s a version of Cliff Notes, I hated those in high school too.

*Artistic Experiences*

My dad, a doctor and father of ten, was fond of saying, “Life is a series of experiences. What did you learn from that one?” For me, this was often offered on the heels of some unfortunate incident--a brutal wrestling defeat, a lost job, a car accident.

It’s worth pointing out that not everything that happens is an experience in the sense I’m using the term, and not every experience is remarkable or noteworthy. Not everything that happens provides a lesson.

Let’s say after a demanding week of work or school, you go to a picnic dinner at your sister’s. While helping her husband tend the grill, you have a beer and talk about sports. Mindlessly you toss a frisbee with your nephews. There are brownies for dessert. You watch an old Disney movie with the kids. It’s an inconsequential day and nothing happens (even though lots took place). Likely as not it’ll fade into the mists of your memory.

Still though, the day has great worth. For a while you escaped your personal concerns, never once reflecting on your problems, yet you emerge from the experience not unlike someone who’s taken a good nap. Refreshed, revitalized, energized to re-engage the same difficulties just as you left them. I’m a believer in naps, literal and metaphorical. We need to get out of our heads. Sometimes just that time away from our troubles lets us come back to them with a fresh perspective, regardless of what we do in that interim.

But let’s revisit that picnic scene. What if while grilling, your brother-in-law shared that he’s afraid he’ll be getting laid off soon, and your nephew confides in you about being bullied at school, or your sister shares that she’s waiting on results of a biopsy. In the aftermath of such conversations, you’re likely to view your own circumstances with a slightly altered perception. The second picnic provides something the first didn’t—context, insight, the invitation for self-reflection.

That’s the great gift art offers. It’s an experience that provides an invitation to reflect on how we view the world, or ourselves, or our place in the world.

We are surrounded constantly by art and artistic pleasures. The clothes we wear, the furniture we relax on, the cars we drive, the homes we live in—all of these were designed by someone with artistic skills. But we don’t typically think of them as art because their primary function is something utilitarian. That is, while pleasing in ways, perhaps even beautiful, they are meant to do something else. In many pursuits, like cooking or sports, we’ll hear someone say that a certain dish or an athlete’s play is “a work of art.” I take that to mean the individual example has somehow transcended the form, exceeds its mere intended purpose, that the artistic pleasure derived from experiencing the instance shifts our focus from the usual matters (like filling our bellies or who’s going to win the game) and demands a different sort of attention. It expands our understanding of the world. Art extends our notion of what is possible.

We witness a gymnast contort her body in ways unimaginable to us or we take a forkful of salmon piccata and taste something new and marvelous, and it goes beyond athletic performance or simple sustenance. Through the experiences, we are momentarily transformed. There exists in such moments the potential to see reality in a different light. It’s very much a small miracle.

Of course, because each of us is unique, we don’t always have the same reactions. What is art for one may not be art for another. That’s okay. If you’re at all serious about writing, it’s smart to start giving some thought to your individual aesthetic, which means your personal definition of art, your sense of what makes something earn the honor of that distinction.

You have endless opportunities to hone your aesthetic. All the time we hear music with ads or in an elevator, but is it art? We watch movies or TV shows—are all these stories art? Is the butterfly picture someone drew for the front of that cheesy Hallmark card art on par with a Picasso?

For me, art creates a visceral experience that cannot be accurately articulated. My sister Ceil took me to a Winton Marsalis Jr. concert last year and during that hour of jazz, something happened to me. I felt uplifted and uncertain, off balance and confident, excited and somehow afraid, defeated and hopeful. I’m good with words, and you can see I’m struggling to explain. That’s a defining benchmark of art. What it does refuses to be distilled or reduced intellectually. Art is primarily a thing of the body, not the mind. It’s got a lot more to do with the heart than the head (even the soul, if you accept such notions).

Imagine inside you there’s a still pond, clear water, flat as a sheet of glass. When you’re in the presence of art, something stirs the water. Maybe a gentle breeze causes ripples or a rock craters the surface. But we feel it. Art is an experience. It’s not something passive we look at but something that happens, a resonating we feel deep within.

Take a few minutes with each of these art examples and see how they resonate for you. What emotions or ideas do you associate with each?

A painting of a person with a yellow face

Description automatically generated

*The Scream* by Edvard Munch. (Public domain).

O snail  
Climb Mount Fuji,  
But slowly, slowly! *- Kobayashi Issa*

I kill an ant  
and realize my three children  
have been watching.  
*- Kato Shuson*

Art adds to our life, enriches it, expands our sense of the world or deepens our sense of humanity. It can make us reflect on how we see each other and how we see ourselves, by generating some new insight into ourselves or our fellow man, buy exposing some chamber of our heart we hadn’t yet known was there, or by deepening an understanding we already had.

***Chapter Two: What Do Words Do?***

Words make the world.

That might seem like a dramatic statement, but it’s something I believe quite deeply. I remember when I was a kid in Catholic school, hearing those lines from the opening passage of Genesis. “And God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.’” It was something out of a magic act, a celestial abracadabra. Why didn’t he use his hands? He’s God. Why didn’t he just think the universe into existence? Because language has the power to create reality.

Each of us lives in our own bodies, and we’re trapped in our minds. We know only what we can observe through our five senses, and that leads us to develop an individual understanding of the world around us. As each of us is unique, our sense of the world is unique. And because this understanding exists only in our mind, we can only share it with others through art and in particular, writing.

Right now, at this moment, I’m using my words to try and put down what I think. And you, out there, listening to my voice, you’re trying to interpret my words and hopefully getting a sense of this concept I'm trying to convey. Ever hear the phrase, “Reading my mind”? That’s exactly what’s happening.

Let me try a couple examples.

When I spell out B-U-N-N-Y, I know what you picture. That’s because I know you understand the word and can translate them into an image. No one pictured a can of Coke or the Eiffel Tower or Barack Obama. An image of a bunny rose up in your mind, triggered by my language. Conjured, if you will.

But what if it’s a word you don’t know? *Gondola.* Some of you might know what a gondola is but imagine what happens for someone who hasn’t yet encountered this word. Nothing happens, right? The mind goes blank. Or, just as often, some term housed in a nearby portion of the brain comes forward. I’ve had students ask “Is it an instrument?” (No, that’s a viola.). Is it a sickness? (No. That’s Gonorrhea). Is it a primate? A healthy snack?

If you did know it, you picture an elegant boat that drifts through the canals of Venice. And if you just learned it, that’s what you’ll picture from now on. This recalls the classic line by the perfect sentence offered by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

This also makes me think of something my wife Beth shared with me when she was in graduate school getting her master’s in education. She brought home a fascinating notion that when children are born, each brain is like an empty card catalog with no language at all. Each word they learn gets written down on a card and stored, and they use this to name the world. Haven’t you ever seen an infant stare at a dog and say “cat”? That makes sense when you consider that at the point in their development, the only other choices they have are “Mom” “Dad” “Ball” and “Moon.” Actually, cat’s a darn good answer.

I’ve seen this theory in action a few times in my life, often in my role as an uncle. My cousin Ricky a son named Kevin. I was palling around with Kevin at an aquarium in North Carolina. He was small enough that I was carrying him mostly, and he was bright-eyed and smiley. Kevin was a chatty boy and very excited, so whether we were looking at nurse sharks or piranhas or barracuda, he’d point and cry “fishies!” Always “fishies” because, at that point, he didn’t have the other words. At one point though, we turned a corner and came up to a display with jellyfish. Translucent and blue, they floated in the illuminated tank, their tentacles dangling below them. Kevin’s smile went flat. His voice went silent. He scrunched up his face (and I picture him now, mentally shuffling through his index cards of acquired language). Finally, triumphant, he aimed a chubby finger and declared, “Kakapus!” Octopus. Not bad for a one-year-old.

And then there was the time I was with my brother and our nephew Tim. We were all out by my parents’ pool. Like Kevin, at this point Tim was little, between 12 and 18 months, in possession of a limited vocabulary and understanding. John was holding Timmy when we heard a plane passing overhead. “What’s that?” John asked, peering up with Tim. He pointed and answered his own question, “A plane.”

Timmy giggled and aimed a finger skyward. “Izzat?” he babbled, liking the sound, I think, mimicking John.

John smiled and repeated, “A plane.”

A few times, Timmy jabbed at the aircraft and got the same response, but then it was gone from view. He wanted to keep playing, so he pointed at something else in the sky and said, “Izzat?”

John answered, “Those are clouds.” Now Timmy’s face, exactly like Sarah’s, shifted. His eyes focused. What followed was astonishing, nothing short of a miracle for a man like me. Because Timmy pointed to a tree, then the brick wall, then a chair, then the pool, rapid fire, mind racing, and John named everything for him. He even named me. “Uncle Neil.” Tim was almost breathless, and he looked vaguely overwhelmed. But I saw it, I was a witness to his awakening as surely as Anne Sullivan was to blind and deaf Helen Keller’s when that pump water flowed through her fingers. Do you know this story, how a child who had existed without language, locked in ignorant darkness, finally recognized that the shapes this woman was making in her hands correlated somehow to the world around her?

Like Keller, Timmy had had an epiphany. Everything in the world has a name, and while this may start with bikes and jellyfish and beards, it’s implications are almost impossible to imagine.

The other night my teenage son was telling me about how he was feeling a bit outside his gang of friends that day because of how they were looking at a certain situation. I said, “Owen, you’ve always been pragmatic. It’s a strength.” He stared at me with an inquiring look, and I explained, “It means you tend to find the most practical solution without overthinking things, and that you tend to not focus on emotions.”

Owen nodded. “That’s me exactly,” he said. “Why’d you never tell me that word before?”

He was angry. Honestly. Now having this word label helped him identify and accept something fundamental about himself.

This notion that everything has a name is a revolutionary concept, so ingrained in our way of thinking that we totally take it for granted. But good writers don’t. They realize that if your teacher asks you to linger after class for a chat, it’s different than if they request a conversation or a conference. That the teacher is signaling to you with her word choice something about the seriousness of the interaction. When she says there are issues in your draft, or concerns, or problems, or fundamental flaws, all these are different. All language is code talk—the letters and sound create a word that represents something else. Good writers understand that it matters when a news network describes a gathering of people at a park as “demonstrators” or “protestors” or “rioters” or “terrorists.” Perhaps even unintentionally, they are offering their version of reality. I’m not here to tell you which one is right or wrong. I’m here to tell you that if you don’t realize this, you’re more likely to be taken for a sucker.

Perhaps more relevant to our current discussion, I urge you to be deliberate with your words. People will assume that your language reflects how you think and feel. Doesn’t it stink when you have to say, “Wait, that’s not what I meant?” or when a hastily composed text leads to a serious misunderstanding? What’s scary is that by definition, language must be interpreted, so there’s always the risk of someone getting it wrong. In fact they’ll always get it wrong. No one will ever understand your words with the same clarity you do. There is always deterioration of the image or message. But that’s one more reason why you’ve got to get it as right as you can, to minimize the potential for degradation.

So here’s my pitch and my plea: whether you’re writing or speaking, be intentional with your words. They are your voice. They are you. As you value yourself, so too you must value your words. When you do that, you’re snatching the fire from the gods, wielding one of the mightiest weapons you possess. When you use words precisely and deliberately, you’re making the world.

***Chapter Three: What Does Fiction Do?***

Art offers an experience that triggers complex feelings prompting not just entertainment but self-reflection. Each form has its own method. Music uses sound. Paintings use pictures and color. Dance uses movement. Fiction relies on story, which in our case is dependent on words. Writers select language designed to convey images and impressions which create an imaginary world in the reader’s brain. Think of it as virtual reality. My mentor Robert Olen Butler called it “the dreamfilm” or “cinema of the mind.” Every story is a little slice of made-up life that we internally witness and, sometimes, take part in. To explore the ways authors conjure this land of make believe, we’ve got to dig into a somewhat broad question—as humans, how do we experience reality in the first place? The answer lies in our five senses.

Consider for a moment the last vacation you had (or any recent potent memory, really). This experience happened in the past, yet you can recall the way you felt while you were there, right, the sensations you associate with what happened. Even summoning up the memory, like clicking a file open on your computer, brings you into contact with a sense of the emotional resonance of the event. Perhaps you were relaxed on beach or overwhelmed walking in a busy metropolis. The only reason you can access those feelings is because you recall specific sensual snippets of the actual lived event. Your sensual experience reflects your inner emotional truth.

Every emotion you’ve even felt came about because of an image.

Every intellectual thought you’ve ever had began with an image.

What you think of as “you,” be it your mind or your spirit or your soul, has no access to reality save through what you can see, hear, taste, touch, smell. If some horrible accident snipped the connections between these sensory mechanisms and your brain, you’d lose the sense that you were alive. I suppose one might make an argument that the imagination would still be active, but to pull the teacher card, there’s a reason you see the word image in imagination, which is nothing more or less than a storm of sensory snippets. Pursue that thought for a moment—you can’t imagine vague concepts like bravery or evil without very clear concrete examples popping into your mind. That’s not the way the brain works.

Our entire reality then is built from the infinite number of sensory stimuli our five senses are bringing us in any given moment. There are many sci-fi movies that exploit this, such as The Matrix, in which evil computers hijack the sensory mechanisms of humans, convincing them that they are living in a virtual world. In a very real way, this is the job of a fiction writer—to commandeer the reader’s mind by activating their senses. To me, that’s the only place a story truly exists. The things I imagine, that’s not a story. And the words I put on a page, that’s not a story. In order to bring the inert words to live, as a writer I need an active reader’s mind. Only there, in that most personal of inner chambers, can something like a story flicker to life.

Because of this, no fiction writer can succeed without a deep understanding of the term **image** and the recognition of some associated principles.

*What exactly is an image?*

An image is any discrete piece of sensory information, a single unit of concrete detail. Because you’re inundated with images, it’s easy to take for granted the central role they play in your life. Here are images in my immediate surrounding as I write this:

The smell of coffee with hazelnut creamer. The pleasant burn of coffee on my tongue. The taste of butter on my English muffin. The feeling of that crunchy toasted bread as I chew it. The pressure of the laptop on my thighs. The sound my fingers make when I tap out these letters, and the little punch sensation at the end of each fingertip. The sound of birds twittering outside my window. The sound of my wife’s voice as she’s talking upstairs on the phone. The black coffee cup and white saucer next to my chair. The white screen and black letters moving across them.

It's my hope that you could experience those sensations, which was only possible because I took care to be precise. For example, I didn’t say, “The taste of my breakfast and the sound of some animal outside.” In that situation, a reader might have inserted sausage and eggs along a lowing cow. Vagueness is a hallmark of an underdeveloped writer. General details don’t hijack the reader’s mind at all. They simply present raw information and the reader must supply the image. Abstract terms (beauty, freedom, rotation) convey a concept but without the use of concrete detail. It’s true that a reader’s mind might summon up an American flag or a bald eagle for freedom, but they might also picture themselves bursting from the school at last bell.

Here's a couple charts I put together to show just what an image is and how there are degrees to specificity.

What I’ve found is that many of the beginning writers’ errors stem from a desire to over-explain. All writers want readers to “get it,” but telling them crucial information bluntly robs readers of one of the joys of reading—and diminishes the impact profoundly. One student, a mathematician, said to me after he understood, “You want us to just give the formula for the equation and let the reader solve it.” That’s pretty good. When you tell, not show, you’re giving the answer.

Below are a handful of examples that you might study. Which “shows” do the best job of capturing the impression overtly spelled out in the “tell”?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Tell (Exposition) | Show (Suggest via sensory detail/imagery) |
| Fred was dressed strangely. | Fred wore a pink tank top and a football helmet. |
| It was a hot summer day. | Sweat dripped from my forehead under my sunglasses. |
| Carl was obsessed with Julia. | Carl stayed awake all night creating acrostic poems using Julia’s name, staring at her Facebook page. |
| Ted was hungry. | Ted’s stomach grumbled and he pictured a Big Mac. |
| Sheila was worried she would be late. | Sheila glanced at the clock and chewed on a fingernail. |
| My breakfast today was terrible. | As I took a spoonful of Frosted Flakes, the soured, chunky milk made me gag. |
| Taliyah greeted Tod warmly. | Taliyah hugged Tod and kissed him on the cheek. |
| The ferocious storm had ravaged the house. | The top half of a pine tree had smashed through the roof and now rested in the living room. |
| I was awaked by a disturbing sound. | I woke to shattering glass. |
| Rosalie told me I was no longer welcome. | Rosalie said, “Get lost you jerkweed.” |
| The hotel bed was uncomfortable. | A spring from the hotel bed dug into my lower back. |

Even in the showing examples, the reader needs to work to fill in some imagery. What kind of furniture is in that living room? Was Rosalie’s voice soft or loud? We can always fine tune. The question for the serious writer becomes, *What do I show and what do I tell?*

\* To the right of the last column, write out an alternative S/P/V word.

\* Make five of your own sets of 3 terms, from vague to precise.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Abstract/Vague/Generic |  | Specific/Precise/Vivid | Alternate Specific |
| Animal | Bird | Cardinal |  |
| Weather | Storm | Hail |  |
| Musical instrument | Horn | Trumpet |  |
|  | Fruit |  |  |
| Smell | Stench |  |  |
|  | Shirt | Tank top |  |
| Utensil | Cutlery |  |  |
| Vehicle |  | VW Bug |  |
| Insect | Bug |  |  |
| Injury |  | Black Eye |  |
|  | Barrier | Barbed-wire fence |  |
|  | Shark |  |  |
| Tool |  |  |  |
| Computer | Laptop |  |  |
| Clouds |  |  |  |
|  | Potato Chips |  |  |

*Show, Don’t Tell.*

If your goal as a writer is to create an imaginary world in the readers’ mind, it follows that the bet way to do that is by activating their senses. This is the essence of the principle *Show, don’t tell*.

This is important enough to dig into. Other ways to think about this might be

Trust images over explanation.

Rely on the 5 senses vs. 5 sins (generalization, explanation, interpretation, analysis, summary)

When you are supplying readers with pure sensory information, the best of which is irreducible (that is, it can’t be broken down any further or more specifically), you’re showing. “Vacation” isn’t an image—we all picture something different. “Amusement park” is a bit better, still, so much left to the reader. With “Ferris Wheel”, I’m comfortable saying we’re sharing something.

My best advise is to guide the, don’t spoonfeed.

Give evidence, don’t interpret.

Prove it, don’t explain.

Our minds interpret sensory information to produce abstractions (like patriotism or faith) that allow higher level thinking. And this is great. It’s what I’m doing right now as I write. But when we’re trying to share a story, it’s important to understand that if we rely only on abstractions or explanations, readers are likely to wander away from the authentic experience we’d like them to have. Worse, they might grasp the intellectual understanding but not feel the emotion wallop.

There’s a world of difference between “Jane was cruel” and “Jane kicked her cat every day.”

In the first sentence, you don’t doubt Jane is cruel. But do you feel it?

Or consider the opening line of a poem that reads, “When I'm in nature, I forget about my problems.” This is a great truth for many, but a fairly common one, and I’d argue that these words are unlikely to invite readers into a unique experience because the language relies so heavily on telling and abstraction. The two vague terms here, nature and problems, allow too much interpretation for the reader. We’re not sharing an experience. Compare now with this:

“Walking barefoot on the beach at dawn, I feel far from the F in red ink on my last English paper, my father’s silent stare over the dinner table, the three a.m. text from my boyfriend that read only, ‘We’re through.’”

That’s not Shakespeare and I accept of course that your brain still needs to process these images, make suppositions, draw connections, but the language is exerting more influence now. (Originally, I had “math homework,” which I thought might conjure textbooks, calculators, fractured pencils, but that gave too much leeway, so I tightened the image).

Here’s a more clearly narrative example: Ted came into the living room, clearly very angry. He asked a provocative question about the nature of his relationship with Marsha, who seemed disinterested.

In those two sentences, I’m relying entirely on telling. There is very little sensory information for your brain to process or interpret. If you’re generating any imagery, you’re more responsible for it than I am. (And as an author I want to have authority. Like a dictator, I want to control the image, so I can control the impression.)

Here’s a different way to handle the same scene: Ted stood between the couch and the TV, raised a trembling fist at Marsha on the couch, and said, “Is this damn show more important than our marriage?” Marsha eased her wedding ring off her finger, let it slip into the shag carpet, and used the remote to tap up the volume.

It’s different, right? Here’s a couple more examples:

My son Owen had a great time sledding.

vs.

As he raced down the hill on his sled, my son Owen laughed with delight and his eyes sparkled with joy.

In the first example, I’m allowing the reader to decide what the “great time sledding” looks like. In the second, I’m doing more showing than telling. Even here though, can you see where I’m still doing some unnecessary explaining? Do we really need “with delight” or “with joy”? Are they worth keeping?

What’s really insidious about this temptation to tell is that, when the impression we’re trying to convey is really important, the urge to tell is strongest. But you’re reaching for the wrong tool, a jackhammer when you need a scalpel.

For years I’ve given students this abstract sentence “The boy looked hurt” and asked them to improve it. Every semester I have an A+ student try to blow me away with something like, “The boy was obviously in excruciating agony.” And sure, that sounds pretty, but it’s nothing compared to “The boy had a screwdriver stuck in his eye.”

I’d guess you shrugged your shoulders at the first sentence, hopefully cringed at the second. The reason for this is because our brains interpret vivid imagery, even when we know it is imaginary, as a kind of reality. Put another way, our minds don’t entirely differentiate between something we actually see and crisp images in our brain prompted by precise language. We react bodily to both.

This bodily response is also why those who face panic attacks or anxiety are encouraged to practice “grounding,” a simple technique meant to break a cycle of strong emotions threatening to spin out of control. The individual breathes deeply and simply locates and names objects in their immediate surrounding, one for each sense mechanism. This foregrounds the physical experience and short circuits the emotional cascade. Try it right now. You’d be surprised.

Author Daniel Kahneman, in his excellent book, *Thinking Fast and Slow,* illustrates this wonderfully with two words:

*Banana Vomit*

He writes, “A lot happened to you during the last second or two. You experienced some unpleasant images and memories. Your face twisted slightly in an expression of disgust, and you may have pushed this book imperceptibly farther away. Your heart rate increased, the hair on your arms rose a little, and your sweat glands were activated. In short, you responded to the disgusting word with an attenuated version of how you world react to the actual event. All this was completely automatic, beyond your control.”

Would the same thing really have happened with this:

*Food. Sick.*

The imagined reality generated by our brains is automatically hazier when we overtly tell readers information directly, whether through summary, interpretation, analysis, or generalization. I’m not arguing that you’ll never use these, but only that when you do so to convey crucial impressions, you’re reaching for the fundamentally wrong tool.

You could tell readers, “During his hike in the woods, Josh heard an alarming sound and was worried that a dangerous creature was nearby.” Or you could show them: “During this hike in the woods, Josh heard a rattle and imagined a coiled snake lurking in the leaves.”

Maybe the best way to wrap this up is to point out the obvious: the imagination—the clear film that runs in your head when you’re reading---is only activated by images. Scour the world around you for unique, striking sensual images. Slow down. That what artistic writing does. It hits pause and invites us to imagine.

*The Special Case of Comparisons*

Similes and metaphors are the most common tools used by writers, and there’s a good reason for that—they really on imagery. But in a certain sense, they must be categorized as “tells” because strictly speaking they are not observed images but constructs of the in the intellect. What I mean is this—you see a cute kid and want to explain to someone else how cute she is, so you go to the mental catalogue in your head of other cute things and come us with, “That kid is cute as a baby bunny.” That intellectual search pulled the act out of the domain of the body. This to me is quite different than a sentence like, “As I took a whiff of the garbage can, I pictured a dead fish.” I guess the distinction I’m making, if the image occurs spontaneously (when you’d never use like or as) or must be deliberated over, isn’t significant for the reader, but it’s a hair worth splitting to me.

Like all imagery, similes and comparisons serve two functions—to generate an image and convey an impression. When we say, “The student speaker looked like a deer in headlights,” deer is referred to as the vehicle, a term I’m fond of because it’s literally conveying the meaning. So what exactly happens here? If successful, the reader imagines a deer in headlights, recognizes the emotions resonating off the image, and then applies them to the subject, here the student. Mission accomplished. But I wonder, even with this example, how many readers skip the middle step. That is, how many recognize the familiar expression and take a short cut, bypassing the image and leaping right to the intellectual “Oh I get it, the kid is scared.” To me, that’s a failed simile, and probably the sort of thing we’d rightly label a cliché, yes? When the comparison becomes so tired that it fails to stimulate the senses, it’s time to retire it. The impactful meaning has been drained out it.

Truly useful similes and metaphors spark something fresh and delightful. Juxtaposing two images side by side generates rich imagery and creates an unexpected but insightful emotional truth. Which is more important, in the grands scheme? That is, is it more important that the reader see what I see or feel what I feel? The implications for this question spread out into all image use, so it bears exploring.

When I was a kid, I watched a lot of boxing with my dad. From the mid 70’s to mid 80’s, we saw a lot of fighters, and none was more exciting than young Mike Tyson. Fierce and powerful, he knocked out opponents mercilessly. If I was going to compare him to an animal in a sentence like this, “In the ring, Mike Tyson was as dangerous as a ….” what would you suggest?

Bear comes to mind. Lion is worth considering. Shark seems odd (because we picture one in the ring, flopping about.” What about hippo? Or mosquito? How about the tse tse fly? No joke, the reality is that hippos kill about five times more people a year than lions, and mosquitos take out nearly ¾ of a million, compared to a few hundred if you combine sharks, bears, tigers, wolves, lions, all that stuff. So if we really want readers to intellectual perceive the deadliness of Mike Tyson, we go with “Tyson was as dangerous as a poison dart frog.” But the problem in that the connotation of the vehicle can overwhelm the denotation. Put another way, it’s much more important that the reader feel what we feel instead of seeing the same image we do. Two more examples.

Let’s say you had a girlfriend with lovely light blonde hair and wanted to describe her to a friend. You might say, “Her hair is the color of mustard,” but, rather than seeing the color you intend, the listener is likely to cringe at the thought of a wet and stinky head. Or what about, “the color of a slightly used tennis ball?” Even if entirely accurate in a literal sense, these are comic failures. Meanwhile, if you offer, “My girlfriend’s hair is the color of August sunshine” they will likely smile. This despite the fact that August sunshine is actually colorless.

Here’s a picture of a ring I wear daily.

A ring with a gold and silver rectangular design

Description automatically generated

It was a gift from my father, who received it from a German prisoner of war named Warner. My father was in Europe on VE day when the surrender took place, but Warner did not want to go home. He felt disgraced, so he asked to stay with the Allied forces and do menial tasks. With my father’s help, this was permitted for a time, but ultimately his commander told him to give Warner three days notice. He’d have to leave. When the time came for his departure, he presented my father with this ring, which bares the initials he and I share.

If I were describing this object to someone, how would I explain the color? Honey? A polished penny? Never. No way. Why? I mean, those are certainly accurate, right? The problem is that with honey, the strongest impressions are the stickiness and the taste. One pictures Pooh bear and bees. As for the penny, I hope it’s obvious how very much I value this ring, so comparing it to the least valuable of all coins feels not just wrong but sacrilegious.

What might be a better choice? What if I went with “My father’s ring is the color of a gold medal”? That’s not strictly, as gold has more luster. Or “My father’s ring is the color of the Heisman trophy”? The Heisman is a bit darker, more bronze than gold, but I’d stand on either of these choices. Why? Because the literal truth is second to the artistic truth. I want to transmit the impression that this ring has great value to me. I need a vehicle that conveys that—the importance—much more than just the color. I once had a student ask me “What if the reader doesn’t know what the Heisman trophy looks like?” A great and fair question. After thinking, I decided it didn’t matter really. Even if they couldn’t get an image of the color at all, they would see the word “trophy” and receive the impression I wanted. Comparisons let you see what the writer sees and feel what the writer feels, and the second is vastly more significant, which leads me to my final point in this chapter.

*Guideline Principle: Specificity = Significance*

You ever have a friend who tells long-winded stories filled with irrelevant details? You know, “Last week I came across an old buddy, Bobby Johnson, who I met in third grade at Campbell Elementary in our hometown of Hopewell, Virginia, not that far from Richmond. We were in Ms. Cane’s class, and that’s what we called her even after she got married and wanted everybody to call her Mrs. Dubchak, a name we all thought sounded like a Russian spy.” By the end of this passage, we’ve forgotten about the initial interaction because the details have pulled our focus away. They’ve shifted our attention.

One of the readerly instincts we all develop is that we concentrate on vivid information and tend to overlook details that are vague. Compare:

Martin drove his fancy car to Muhlenberg Lake, where as a boy he fed geese with his father, who taught him to skip stones.

Martin drove his Corvette Stingray, customized with a 6-cylinder engine with flames painted along the sides, to a place that was special to him as a boy.

One is not better than the other. Indeed, both details may have some relevance. The question is what inferences is the reader likely to draw from what you’re sharing. If you write, “Wearing a simple blue dress, Lisa arrived twenty minutes before the wedding ceremony began,” your takeaway would be that she liked to be early. The blue is merely background, a detail not unlike scenery on a stage. The impression doesn’t change much if we make it green, does it? These secondary details have their place, as they stimulate the readers’ senses.

“Wearing a blue dress she’d selected after visiting three Goodwill stories, Lisa arrived early for the wedding.”

Now, we realize that Lisa is a bit strapped financially.

“Lisa wore a white dress with covered in rainbow polka dots to the wedding” leaves us thinking Lisa may be a bit obnoxious or seriously impaired in the fashion department.

Where does the emphasis go in each of the following? How does your impression of Charles shift?

Charles woke early and drove to the hospital to see his mother, who’d had a stroke two days beforehand and now sat paralyzed in a bed, half her face collapsed as if melted.

Charles woke at 6:12 and drove to St. Mary’s, where his mother was recuperating from a recent health episode.

Charles woke to his phone’s alarm, the opening notes of Bethoven’s Fifth, and drove to the hospital to visit his sick mother.

Charles work early and drove his 2015 Ford Fusion, which had bad tires and needed a brake job, to the hospital to visit his mother, a stroke victim.

Charles work early to drive to the hospital, where he took his mother’s paralyzed hand in his and prayed the rosary out loud, even though he wasn’t sure she understood the words anymore.

Here are two versions of the same actual story. In the larger box, I’m relying almost entirely on the concrete details my senses brought me. I’m showing. In the smaller box, I’m providing the intellectual facts. I’m telling. Do you see the difference?

When I lived in Wilmington, North Carolina, something happened to me. I was driving my Kia Sephia down Dock Street beneath a canopy of sycamore branches. I looked at my watch and pictured my brother-in-law Kevin sitting on his couch watching the Raiders kick off. When I looked up, a man was doing jumping jacks in the shine of my headlights. His eyes were wide, and he held up his palms as I closed in on him. I pulled around the side of him and leaned towards the open passenger window. I think I said, “What’s up?” and he opened the door and sat down. He smelled of nicotine and was pinching a tiny cigarette from which he took quick puffs. He stared over the dashboard. “I need a ride. I need a ride. I need a ride.” Small beads of sweat dotted his nose. He had a squared jaw. He was rocking gently.

“I can’t give you a ride,” I said. “I thought you were in trouble.”

“I am in trouble,” he said. “I need a ride. I need a ride.”

I told him I couldn’t give him a ride and told him he had to get out of my car. He told me God would bless me if I’d drive him to the bottom of the street. When I looked there, I saw a cone of yellow light from a streetlamp. Over his shoulder, I could only see shadows. I imagined men bent in the bushes by the street lamp. I asked, “If I bring you to the corner, you’ll get out?”

“You bet,” he said. “You bet.”

I tapped the accelerator and we coasted downhill in silence. The moment I pulled up to the stop sign, he tossed the butt out the window, stretched one hand across the space between us and turned the key. The engine died. I grabbed his hand and felt the US AIR key ring that my landlord gave me snap in his palm. I imagined my loose keys. I imagined him inserting a key into my apartment door and stepping into my home.\* Then I felt a poke in my ribs and I instinctively grabbed at that. What I felt in my palm were the ridges of his knuckles and his closed fist, but nothing else. Our faces were about six inches apart. Up close, I smelled something sweet beneath the nicotine.

“You got to do the right thing,” he said. “You got to do the right thing for yourself and give up what you got.”

I pictured my money clip in my pocket and the eight bucks I knew I had. I also pictured him passing my Visa over a counter somewhere.

My heart was pounding away and I was breathing quickly. I said, “We don’t have to do this. Look, my name is Neil and I’m just heading to my sister’s to catch some football. We don’t have to do this.”

He said, “Great. My name is Francine and you got to do the right thing. I don’t want to shoot you.” He poked me in the ribs.

I saw a house catty-corner with the light on. I imagined someone inside with a phone in their hand. 9-1-1. I also imagined me calling out and him freaking out.

Once, when I was living somewhere far from home for a while, something weird happened one night. While on my way to spend some time with a relative, I encountered a man acting strangely and decided to see if I could help. The man, who seemed under the influence of drugs maybe, got in my car and asked for a ride. I was extremely nervous but saw no way to avoid saying yes.

I brought him where he wanted but instead of getting out, he tried to mug me. He pretended to have a gun and insisted I give him my money. I feared for my safety and it was all horribly awkward.

I squeezed his hand and said, “Look, you ain’t got a gun. Please just get out of my car.”

And he looked away for a second and then back at me and said: “Don’t make me get what I got in my other pocket.”

I leaned out the window and imagined my deep, throaty man voice declaring, “Please call the police. There is a robbery in progress.” But what came out was, “hhhelllp!”

Francine’s shoulders relaxed.; his muscles loosened. My keys tinkled to the floor. He opened the door and got out and then leaned back in and offered his hand. His palm was incredibly pink. I shook it. I watched him walk behind me and in the rearview mirror I followed him back up the street. I imagined running him over but instead I drove away, sweating.

Finally I realized he didn’t have a weapon and I called out for assistance, which I guess startled him because he left me alone. Even after he was gone, I was crazy rattled.

***Chapter Four: How Does Fiction Teach Us?***

***(And is Theme the Most Important Lesson?)***

Everything you learned in life, ever, was the result of an experience you had that relied on your five senses. If you think capitalism is evil, it’s because of events you’ve witnessed directly or had transmitted to you. If you know your mother loves you or your father is not reliable, it’s because of specific incidents in your life. It well could be that your conclusions are the accumulations of many small episodes or individual ones of great significance. In a very real way, you are the sum total of all your stories.

The ancients understood the power of the tale, and this is why—worldwide—we encounter cultures with rich traditions of stories that explain human being’s place in the cosmos and pass along the values and wisdom of a culture. Take these two classic examples:

A scorpion wants to cross a river and says to a fox, “Let me ride on your back.”

The fox says, “No way. You’ll just sting me.”

“Don’t be silly,” the scorpion protests. “If I did that I would drown too. You’re totally safe.”

This made sense to the fox, and he let the scorpion crawl on his head. There were halfway across the river when the fox felt a stab in his neck. As he began to go under, he asked, “How could you do that?”

The scorpion replied, “I couldn’t help myself. After all, I’m a scorpion.”

Sun and Wind were having an argument about who was more powerful. From above, they observed a traveler tightly clinging a blanket to his shoulders and agreed this would be a good test. Wind began to blow strong gusts at the traveler, battering him from all sides, but he just tightened his grip. The sun parted the clouds and let her rays gradually warm the traveler’s back, until at last he shrugged off the blanket.

Moral: Persuasion is better than force.

Both of these tales may entertain, but their primary function is to educate, to convey principles—“the moral of the story.” We find most holy figures telling parables to express their insight. Something worth noting here is that in narratives such as these, the characters are intentionally flat. We don’t know anything about that poor guy with the blanket, like his name or where he was going. (Indeed, that’s a good example of specifics that would draw our attention away from what’s significant. The moment you tell readers, “There was a guy named Tony Dagostini wrapped in a blanket heading for the docks,” people start wondering what’s on his mind.)

Not all stories have deep philosophical meaning yet still have value. It’s a healthy need to be entertained and distracted. But even stories that are considered pure popcorn still impart values and reflect the zeitgeist of a time. Take Star Wars.

I once heard the great Joseph Campbell discussing that film, actually in the presence of its creator, George Lucas. Campbell talked about how the shaman of the tribes would dream for the village, tell stories that spoke to their shared hopes and concerns. With Star Wars, he pointed out that in the mid 70’s, computers were actually becoming a part of people’s work and personal lives and on a deep level, society was anxious. So it makes sense that the villain in the story would be a nightmare half man/half machine, who lived on a planet of all computers. And who will confront him but a farm boy, who comes from the natural world and is guided by a spiritual mentor who, in the movie’s final climax, urges him to rely on his humanity, not the computers guiding him, and only then can he destroy the mechanical world. The movie was, Campbell argued, a reassurance that the human heart would triumph over technology.

George Lucas looked stunned but nodded thoughtfully.

Artists can’t always explain why they make the choices they do. But there still may be a reason.

When I first encountered that Campbell interview, I’d seen Star Wars a half dozen times and new it well, like most kids from my generation. But it having a theme like that never occurred to me. Does that mean it failed? Hardly. As artistic entertainment, it had captured my imagination and, at the same time, transmitted its value system to me on a subconscious level. I had never articulated its meaning but still had inculcated it.

Part of the problem I have with the term “theme” is that the search for intellectual meaning can detract from the artistic experience. In some classes I took in high school and college, I came across teachers that would focus entirely on the thematic import, which they saw as a single idea to be discerned. So if you read Moby Dick and didn’t immediately see it was about man’s inferiority to nature, you must be a bad reader. If that’s the case though, how many folks had a successful viewing of Star Wars?

I see theme as a lot more complicated than that, something more open to interpretation. As opposed to a simplistic fairy tale or parable, a successful work of art can be open to more than one valuable interpretation. Isn’t Star Wars also about Han Solo’s journey from greedy mercenary to a rebel with a cause? Virginia Woolf argued that the reader and writer were partners as in a marriage, working together to create meaning. The tricky thing is finding that balance. Because while there may be multiple themes, it is possible to bring too much of yourself to a work. The viewer who walks away from Star Wars saying “This is about how it’s up to us all to take down the evil empire of capitalism” might be drawing too heavily on their previous experience, disrupting the marriage if you will.

But a reader bringing too much of themselves is a risk we have to take, because no story or artwork can have meaning without a reader. This sounds bizarre, but in terms of this conversation, if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, it makes no noise. You see for me, there’s no such thing as a story in my head when I’m imagining what might happen, and it’s not a story when I write it down or when it gets published. The only “product” I can properly call a story is the mental exercise that takes place in the mind of the reader exposed to my work, the cascading synaptic fireworks that result from the way my words interact with that individual’s unique life experiences.

*Red Riding Hood*

During the years my wife and I lived in Louisiana, we evacuated ahead of several hurricanes. On one such occasion, our son Owen was a toddler, and he saw the whole thing as a great adventure—a long car ride, a hotel room. Meanwhile Beth and I were anxious about the storm’s impact on our home, exhausted after a long day in heavy traffic and various failed attempts to secure a place to stay. Once we finally got settled, I curled up on the bed with Owen and recalled in my haste I hadn’t packed any books. He was a child of routine and each night that meant a book party of three stories. When I explained to Owen, I’d have to just tell him some stories, he looked highly suspicious.

To my shame, the best I could think of in my harried state was Little Red Riding Hood, and I began a somewhat half-hearted rendition. “There once was a girl named Red Riding Hood, and she lived with her mother on the edge of a dark forest. Her grandma, who lived on the other side of the forest, was sick, and Red set out one day to bring her a basket of muffins to help cheer her up. As she set out, her mother warned her to stay on the path, so she’d be safe from the creatures of the forest.”

I’ll bet if I went on much longer there, I’d start losing your interest. It’s a story you know, so well in fact that I’ll even wager some of you were tempted to skim. Even if you’re getting some imagery, you’re not generating strong emotions for the flat character because she’s not registering as real. In a certain sense, she’s not much more than the guy with the blanket, only a tad more inflated. (Recall though this is story meant to entertain and educate, so character-depth isn’t a priority.)

I went on for a while, lots of moonlight and creepy sounds, etc. Some snarling in the shadows. Whatever. And then I happened to glance over at my son. Owen was ghostly white. His eyes were wide open, and he was taking shallow breaths. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

He took a breath. “The little girl,” he said. “Is the wolf gonna eat her?”

Epic father fail.

What I hadn’t considered was that unlike you or me, Owen had never heard the story before. He didn’t know the outcome. To him, it wasn’t a simple tale with a message but a story about a kid, one like him. And here I was putting imagery in his head about her getting ripped to shreds. By wolves.

From our adult perspective, we can say that’s a story about listening to your parents. “Stay on the road.” It’s about obedience. Some say in the modern world it’s a sort of cautionary, “Don’t talk to strangers.” I’ve had students say they see it as a warning against drug use (drawing specific threats from their own experiences to create meaning). All these feel like valid interpretations to me, and it’s true we could dig deeper in the symbolic implications of the main character being a female, the potential of the color red, the connections even between the wolf and menstrual cycles, the introduction of the hero axe man by American tellers. Really, you’ll find this stuff, and it’s not without substance.

But whatever theme you want to pin on that story, you can’t get to any of it without a much more important truth. Before “Red Riding Hood” can be about listening to your parents, the dangers of the adult world, the threat of sexual assault, it’s about this: terror. That’s what Owen was feeling. That’s the meaning of the story, ahead of any intellectual takeaway and to my mind more valuable.

None of this is meant to diminish the intellectual power of art, the important messages art can transmit. I only wish to make an argument for the supremacy of the emotional experience as, at the very least, a sort of essential a priori.

The advice I’ve long offered my students is to ask themselves a simple question, “What aspect of the human condition is this story dealing with?” Even though stories often deal with many, pick the one word that comes strongest to your mind. War. Family. Violence. Injustice. Racism. Loss.

Next, ask what statement the story may be making about that term. Believe me, it’ll always sound stiff and shallow, even cliché. “Family can support us.” “Loss is painful to deal with.” “Tragedy often changes people.” That’s perfectly fine, even necessary. You’re not out to fully capture the complex depth of a novel in a sentence, just suggest it. Moby Dick is x thousand words, so “God beats man” won’t do it justice. But it’s a good enough label. Just catch the gist.

As a writer, I frankly think it’s dangerous to go too far into your own theme, as it’s something that develops as you write and ultimately requires readers to come to life. So for me, that single term is plenty. When people ask when you’re working on, saying, “A novel about fatherhood,” or “A short story about death” is a totally acceptable answer. Getting too detailed about your goals can steal the magic, suck all the air from the room. Fully articulated your theme (“A novel about the ways modern fatherhood demands men surrender a essential part of their evolutionary identity but offers new wonders denied to many over the centuries”) turns it into a thesis from a freshman comp class, and we all remember those with righteous dread.

*Mirrors and Windows*

First introduced by Emily Styles in 1988, a very useful notion to consider when thinking about theme is the idea that every story (or artwork) one encounters can serve as either a mirror or a window. In the case of a mirror, the reader sees themselves reflected in terms of identity, life experiences, essential truths. In the case of a window, the reader can receive insights into a life they haven’t experienced, truths they have not been exposed to.

Either one can be provocative or affirming, but the most successful artistic experiences tend to offer something new. Someone who grew up in poverty might read a story about an economically disadvantaged family and think, “Yes, that’s exactly how miserable that is,” but if the writer includes some fresh element or additional nuance, the reader is rewarded in a deeper, more rich way. Meanwhile, a wealthy person might read the story and gain access to an entire set of emotional truths and even a whole reality they simply did not understand.

My rich/poor example is extremely simplified, as each of us contains multitudes and are defined by dozens of identity markers.

When I was teaching graduate school, I had a great student who was presenting on the marvelous James Baldwin story, “Sonny’s Blues.” At one point, she said, “I just think you need to be Black to really get this story.” When she’d concluded, I went back to that statement and the class began a deeper dive into it. The narrator of the piece is a husband and father living in Baltimore and teaching mathematics. He’s struggling to find ways to help his younger brother, a jazz musician and addict. Both characters are African Americans and there’s no doubt that adds a significant and powerful layer of meaning to the story. I don’t argue that readers with similar live experiences will, overall, be more prone to having a successful read, likely in the “mirror” way discussed earlier. In a similar vein, someone with experiences with addiction, either directly or secondhand, would be inclined to empathy. Furthermore, the narrator’s role in his family and even his job play a factor that’s far from negligible. I can even imagine someone who has found it hard to help a struggling sibling having a reading I might call “successful,” with some of the story’s themes being mirrors and others windows.

No one will ever have the exact same experience that the author does with their story, but a good writer can lead a good reader to have a similar experience. And (this comes from a man who accepts the privileges that come with how society views him) I don’t want to think that any art object would limit its appeal to only readers of a certain kind or experience. If a woman writes a story that draws on her experience as a survivor of breast cancer yes, I understand that other woman who’ve survived breast cancer are likely to tune in more easily. But do they automatically have more claim to the story than woman who had brain cancer? Or men who had testicular cancer? I don’t like the notion that art excludes. I want it to be an open invitation.

An invitation to what, exactly? I asked students once why we read, and the wide-ranging discussion led to some thoughts on “Getting more life.” We each live a singular existence and thus our range of emotions are limited. Reading increases that spectrum dramatically. Fiction also tends to be more regulated/distilled than life, since it lacks the randomness of reality. Fiction is “life bracketed” as one student astutely put it. Another challenged us by noting if we wanted access to more life, we’d all visit the old folks home and visit with the dying, and it’s true that fiction allows for a controlled, safe environment. Fair enough. We want these explorations to be private, but that’s because they make us vulnerable.

Kafka knew this when he wrote “we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”

Perhaps even more damning, the critic William H. Gass wrote of readers, “We pay heed so easily. We are so pathetically eager for this other life, for the sounds of distant cities and the sea; we long, apparently, to pit ourselves against some trying wind, to follow the fortunes of a ship hard beset, to face up to murder and fornication, and the somber results of anger and love; oh, yes, to face up— in books— when on our own we scarcely breathe.”

Whether affirming life lessons already learned by our experiences or grasping at the unknown truths drawn from outside the world we know, as readers we yearn to feel and reflect on meaning.

***Chapter Five: Why are Characters Cornerstone?***

When he was in second grade, my son Owen’s teacher gave him a basic exercise called a character sketch. His assignment was to pick a pet rock, name it, and answer questions about the rock’s personality. Recognizing the assignment from my own classes, I was eager to help out, but when we went into our backyard Owen rejected every rock I offered. We walked around the neighborhood, rejecting rocks one by one. Before long we had driven to the local creek, where Owen assured me, “These rocks are only good for skipping, not being pets.” Long story short, this is how I ended up stealing a rock from landscaping outside a nearby local restaurant, Aroogas. Turns out that sometimes parenting results in petty crime. At last though, we had just the right rock, grey and oblong, the exact size of my son’s tiny palm.

Here is how Owen handled the assignment:

What is your pet rock’s name: Harvey

Where does your pet rock look like: Cool.

Where does your pet rock live? In my bedroom

What does your pet rock like to eat? Cheeseburger

What does your pet rock to do for fun? Talk with me

What does your pet rock do for a living? Be a storm chaser

What is the greatest thing your pet rock has ever done? He went inside a tornado once.

What is your pet rock afraid of? Nothing.

When I read these in class, students initially smirk, then smile, and by the end there is often appreciative laughter. Isn’t it magical that somehow Harvey transforms from a rock and becomes, in the prime act of narrative alchemy, a sentient being? That’s because, odd as this is to say, we get to know him distinctly, separate him from all those other rocks. He stands out to us. He has, well, character. And what is the origin of this distinct nature?

Well, what do you think Owen’s favorite food was? Cheeseburgers, of course. And would it surprise you to know that at that point, he was obsessed with a TV show on the Weather Channel where maniacs drove toward tornadoes to film the storm? So, like all writers, Owen shared with his creation some traits that he has. Isn’t this only proper and fitting? Aren’t we compelled to write about things we care about? When I was in college I wrote about being a student, a son. Decades later, there was a period where all I wrote about was fatherhood. It’s right and good and just for teenagers to write about teens and their concerns. Whatever your interests are, whatever matters occupy your mind, they should help fuel your art.

But also, and perhaps more importantly, Owen gave Harvey a sort of superpower—no fears. I find this especially interesting because Owen, like all second graders, wanted his closet door closed at night and could be upset by certain ideas. He didn’t like that feeling scared. So his creation became a manifestation of something he wanted but didn’t have—fearlessness.

I’ll argue then that our characters come from our dreams and our nightmares. They spring from our desires and our fears. Many of those father figures in my short stories when my sons were growing up were horrible dads, in part because I was aware of my shortcomings but also because I was deeply worried about failing my children. Much like our dreams are supposedly helping our subconscious process the waking world, our fiction offers us the opportunity to safely explore our innermost selves.

This puts us in close proximity to the advice to “Write what you know,” and I agree with that concept, but it demands a brief clarification. In fiction, I don’t interpret this to mean, “Write about the thematic truths you’ve already discovered.” This feels more like the purview of nonfiction. So if you spend a week in Mexico on vacation and realized that many Americans take their wealth for granted, I’d argue you should write an essay sharing that rather than trying to search for characters to act out a play embodying that predetermined theme. In this case, in my experience, the characters tend to be mere puppets.

Rather, “Write what you know” means don’t surrender the value of your daily experience, your daily life, the world outside your window. If you have expert knowledge of skateboarding, for Pete’s sake, use it. If you’re familiar with the beach, set a story there. More importantly, “Write what you know” means write about the issues that matter to you, the things you care about—whether that means football or faith, horseback riding or comic books. This is so important because writing what you know provides easy access to authenticating detail and, crucially, it gives the work—and your characters--a sense of vitality that’s incredibly hard to fake. Art can’t be phoned in, and your characters may indeed reflect some of what you dream for and worry about. Letting your characters flow from you is the key to bringing them to life.

I do caution students against modeling characters directly on themselves or people they know well. This sort of “cloning” is problematic because if you think of the grandfather in the story as your own grandfather and suddenly the character organically acts in way your grandfather never would, you’re tempted to be untrue to the story for the sake of your memory, resulting in something inauthentic. Characters come from us, like children, so it’s only right there be some recognizable shared traits, but when readers suspect they are in the presence of thinly-veiled biography, the fiction tends to wilt.

Readers are in search of a true human experience (even if it involves fantastic elements) and for that it’s crucial they have the sense that these imaginary beings are in fact “real.” Only in this scheme can readers see the characters actions as somehow reflective of their own existence. They can compare and contrast themselves with the characters, feel more vital and alive. All this leads us to an essential, paramount question: What makes readers experience a character as real?

Though I was born in Pennsylvania, where I now live and teach, for 15 years I was a student and teacher in Louisiana. During that time, it seems every day I met an interesting character or two. There was Florence Dalvisio, my landlady who seemed to always be on her porch ready to give advice. She had a bomb shelter in her backyard and a cat named Shadow I once saw snatch a hummingbird from the air. Or Carl the bartender who’d lost his larynx to throat cancer and so had to hold a medical device to his neck to speak with a robot voice. Or Les, my neighbor, a 6 foot 6, 300 pound monster of a man who trained Marines at Fort LeJuene but who also ran an antique shop on weekends.

I haven’t seen any of these real people in over two decades. Why do they stand among the thousands I’ve encountered since?

When we talk about character, what we mean is an imaginary person that readers encounter or experience as real, a fictional being who they come to believe in and respond to as if they were flesh and blood. Characters have discernible personalities, distinct and unique, such that just as with real people, readers come to feel like they know them. What I mean by that is that readers can, at some point, speculate with confidence on how characters may act and understand something about their motivations for those actions.

Here’s a key point worth emphasizing: readers come to know characters the same way you come to know people in your life, little by little, one impression at a time.

In the real world, your first impression of someone might be their physical appearance, so let’s start there. We all know how foolish and narrow-minded it is to judge someone on exterior factors often obvious at first glance—their rough age, their gender, their hair color, their height, their ethnic origin. But it’s also foolish to suggest people don’t do this every day, and readers tend to as well, so we can’t ignore this habit. In the examples I opened with, does it matter that Ivory and Les were both African-Americans or that Carl was bald with a thin grey moustache? These details might help you visualize them, but in the moment, as I was writing, my mind reached for other details that seemed to me more relevant. Still, just to lay a foundation, my advice is to nail down some basic exterior facts early in your work (first paragraph, first page, first scene). If I’m reading a first-person narrated story, and it starts off, “Every day it seems my life gets harder,” I’d like to know sooner rather than later if the speaker is a it matters to me if the voice I'm hearing belongs to Glen, a business executive or Sonia, an aging widower. Each one can have serious problems and be narratively compelling, but a little context goes a long way, right?

We’ll always learn more about your character later (otherwise, why keep reading?) but it’s smart to anchor the reader with some basic information up front, even a few fundamental details.

As for appearance, I like to give readers a couple distinguishing physical traits to latch onto: a young man with a broad nose and a beaming smile; a guy with piercing blue eyes and a brown beard flecked with red; a muscular woman with shoulder length blonde hair. That last one stands out because it suggests something about the interior—a desire to be fit--and you might give such details special attention. When readers encounter a girl with pink hair or a tattoo that reads, “Love like you’re not scared,” they begin to see penetrate beyond the physical surface. Those details make more lasting impressions because they have more depth, even if it they only hint at some interior truth rather than reveal some aspect of the character entirely.

Something else I think is quite important is to supply names. In the real world, often you learn this not long after you’ve first met someone, and it helps you remember them. It distinguishes them from others. Names do matter. Some writers like to leave their characters nameless, a vague and mysterious “he” or “she.” And of course, you’re allowed to do this; it’s your story. Students have often told me they think this lets readers put themselves in the characters’ shoes, which I suppose might have some credence. But more often, I think it’s lazy. So my general advice is this—if you know the character’s name and have decided not to share it, so bet it. But if you don’t know the character’s name, decide on one, and try reading the first page with that plugged in for some of the pronouns.

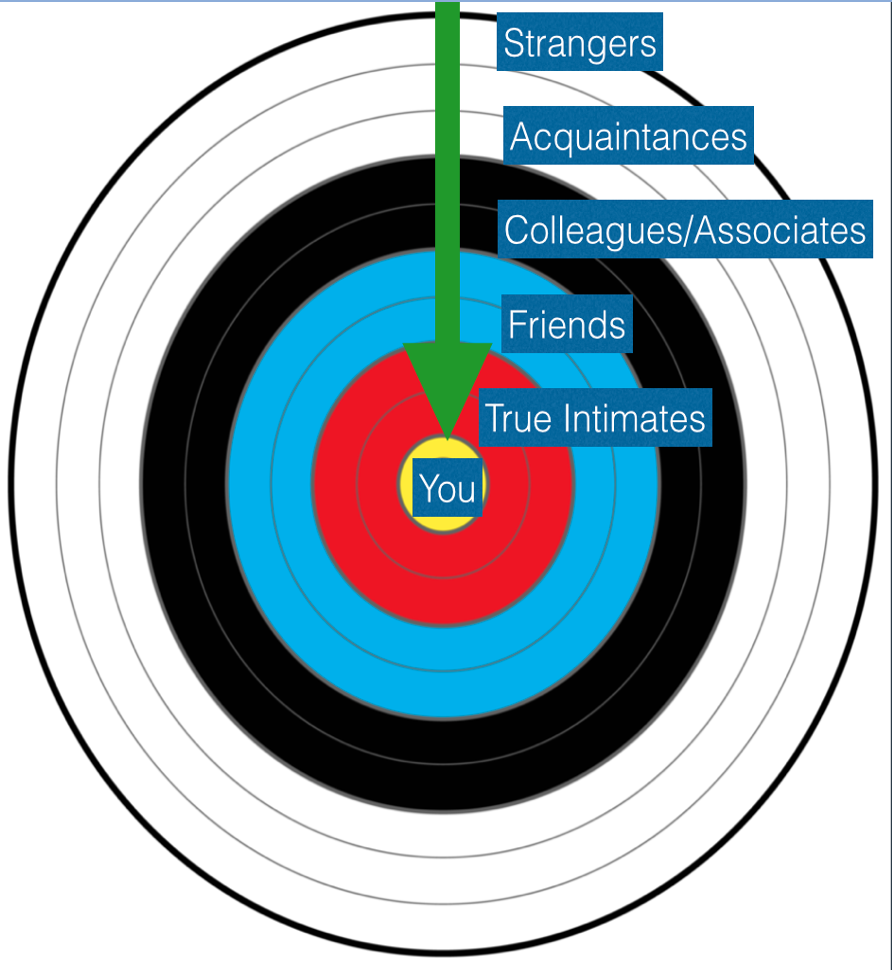
To reiterate, in the real world or on the page, I think if you conclude someone named Poindexter is a nerd you’re guilty of a version of prejudice, the same way as if you jump to the conclusion that an Irish character is automatically an alcoholic or a blonde cheerleader doesn’t read or that the aged mayor of a small southern town is instantly racist. Even if these turn out to be true, to conclude that’s the case at first glance is evidence of a lazy mind. All that being said, readers will naturally begin to draw some tentative inference from names and exterior details, so spend some with such things.

Let’s get back to this notion of meeting someone in the real world. Think for a minute about any group of people—your extended family, your class, your soccer team. In that group, aren’t there some people you know better than others, yes? Two crucial important questions:

1. The first key question is:

What sort of knowledge or understanding differentiates one sort of relationship from another? This is a realm where language fails us, but I’d argue that there are more relationship types than we have names for. Here’s an example of just how clumsy there terms really are:

Think of yourself as living at the center of an infinite number of concentric circles. Spread around you is every other human being, at a distance based on how well they do or don't know you.

Strangers—Associates—Colleagues—Friends—Intimates

Where would we put neighbors on here, or family members? I don’t want to get hung up on this, because the point is a simple one. Somehow—with a handful of special relationships--you move from not knowing an individual at all to knowing them incredibly well.

Pause here for a moment and ask yourself, how many people know you? That is, how many understand the core essence of your soul in the same way you do? For most of us, that number is quite low. In part, that’s because we think of such things as secret, precious, worth being guarded. It is special knowledge, shared only with a chosen few. In life, we protect our secret selfs. In fiction, we reveal the true nature of our characters.

This is why, if you think about it, it’s quite possible you know more about the main character of the last good novel you read than you do about a neighbor you’ve lived next to for ten years. In literary studies, you’ll learn about the difference between a flat character, defined by being one-dimensional and easily summed up (like the evil crime lord, the nosy neighbor, or the adoring, grandmother). Round characters, who are complex and rich, sometimes even contradictory, are a bit harder to put in a neat category. (What happens, for example, when that grandmother who loves baking cookies with her grandchildren also cheats at church bingo on Wednesday nights? She inflates, right?

2. The second key question is through what mechanisms do we come to move from an initially generic and superficial understanding of another human to a deeper and more profound one? In your own life, how has this happened?

Think of a romantic college relationship that begins with a casual meeting after a class, followed by subsequent encounters in the library or coffee shop, maybe followed by a shared visit to a campus event. Later there are official dates, and as the couple shares experiences and begins to trust, more and more private information is shared, as are more intimate experiences. Say they get married, have children, buy a house, fight over wall color and where to spend the holidays. They go to weddings and funerals and tend each other when they are sick in the night. One loses faith in a religion and one ends up needing rehab but they stick together. All this while, they grow closer. And by closer, what I mean is that they come to learn each others’ hopes, dreams, and fears. These are broad terms, but useful.

I spent 3 years studying with Robert Olen Butler, a Pulitzer Prize winner who taught me a great deal about writing. And one of his most important lessons was that readers come to recognize a character as real when they realize that person’s yearning—the thing they desire most. Bob argued that one universal truth about people is that we all want things, so desire is a currency everyone understands. What does your character want? That’s a worthwhile question.

A student of mine named Summer used to offer the useful distinction between a character’s goal and motivation. The goal is easily defined and quantified—I want to win the race, make a million dollars, catch the criminal, kill the alien. But a motivation is trickier, more complex, I want to understand my place in the world, I want to have a better relationship with my mother; I want to be a better friend. Goals and motivations can often merge—I want to win the spelling bee so I can have more self-confidence. And certainly someone doesn’t need to achieve their goal for them to be interesting—we just have to learn more about them.

It’s true that while my summary above takes years, fiction often expedites this process by focusing on traumatic or highly intense events. My son formed bonds with his band mates or the other cast members of a play. My father talked about how close he began with his fellow soldiers during WW2. The pressures of college or graduate school often create lifelong bonds. I barely knew my neighbors in Louisiana until a hurricane threatened our lives and we had to share supplies.

Please don’t think I believe you need a natural disaster or a war in your fiction. You don’t. But what you do need is a way to show readers something new, unknown, and interesting about your character.

One way to think about your goal as a writer of fiction is to make your reader a witness to a revealing event or experience in the life of your character that provokes some sort of emotion or thought. When the reader meets your character on page one, they know nothing about them. But gradually, one impression at a time, they come to understand them, so that by the last word, they feel like they know them better than some actual people in the real world.

***Setting***

Readers are constantly assessing characters, hoping to know them better, on the lookout for cues about the true nature of their personalities. But the impressions they form and the judgements they make do not take place in a vacuum. In ways both subtle and profound, they rely heavily on cultural context. This is why I think of setting (the general time period and physical location of the story) is best viewed of as part of character.

Where a character lives, and *when* they live, provides crucial context for their worldview and actions. Indeed, I might argue it’s all but impossible to adequately judge a character without knowledge of their broader reality. (And we see here the value of academic studying the time period of a work to enhance its meaning).

I had the chance to visit Germany recently, and while there I saw a group of young boys, maybe 14 or so, sipping beer at an outdoor café. That same image has a very different vibe if it were here in Central PA where I live. Up on the autobahn, I was driving at 110 miles per hour. Here that would make me a maniac. There I was keeping pace with traffic. After a close call at an intersection in town, I flashed a fellow driver the okay sign to let him know we were fine. He scowled at me and drove away, and my son Owen informed me that in Germany, I’d just made a rather obscene gesture.

My wife was born in Buffalo and spent a few years living in New York city. When she moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana, she was unsettled by the casual way waiters or grocery store clerks would address her (Honey. Child. Sweetie). In her experience, these were acts of open aggression, even hostility. In Lake Charles, this was common courtesy, an indication of genuine warmth and hospitality. Something similar happened when a grad student moved in from Chicago. She told me people kept smiling at her and saying hi when she walked along the lakefront, which made her feel threatened.

Maybe it’s best to think of setting as the air our characters breath. We’re all so immersed in our own atmosphere we don’t pay attention to it. But if you’ve got a woman walking into a polling station demanding to vote, it matters if it’s 1889 or 1989. A biracial couple holding hands at a high school prom has a certain emotional valence in 2020 and a different one in 1950, or in Boston versus Alabama. Or imagine a woman telling her husband, “It’s not enough for me to stay at home with the baby. I’m getting a part time job for my own sanity” in 1950 or now. Context matters, that’s the lesson here.

Now do I think that means you’ve got to put a time and place stamp on every story’s first line? No way. Indeed, those sort of clunky expository statements often call attention to the author in regrettable ways. As is so often the case, subtlety is a good approach. The moment a character pulls out their phone, we know we’re in modern times. A song on the radio or a reference to any event has the potential to summon an entire zeitgeist.

***Exercise 1: The Character Sketch***

Most writers learn about their characters by writing scenes, but an exercise like this can help you explore your character and better understand the difference between superficial information and revealing detail. Fill out as many as you like but highlight 2 or 3 from each grouping that you find illuminating. Add some facts not asked for if they occur to you. Don't overthink this.

Name & Age

Gender identity

Physical description

Profession//Occupation//Source of Income/

Dream job

Amount of money in savings//Debt

Education

Current place of residence

Hometown

Family

What kind of clothes does x wear?

Car does x drive? (any bumperstickers?)

Food does x like? (anything mageneted to the fridge?)

Movies/TV shows does x watch? Last concert?

Favorite website?

Books does x read//Music does x listen to?

House of worship does x attend?

Hobbies does x enjoy?

How does x relax?

Favorite thing to do on weekend?

Anything interesting in x’s purse/pocket/wallet? Refrigerator? Nightstand? Garbage?

What’s on x’s to do list, right now? 3 items:

What causes x stress?

What brings x the most joy?

What is x’s greatest fear?

What is x’s greatest success?

Worst day in high school?

Best day in the last year?

What 3 adjectives would X apply to themselves?

Who is x most disappointed by?

What does x believe in most?

What makes x angry? What reaction does this prompt?

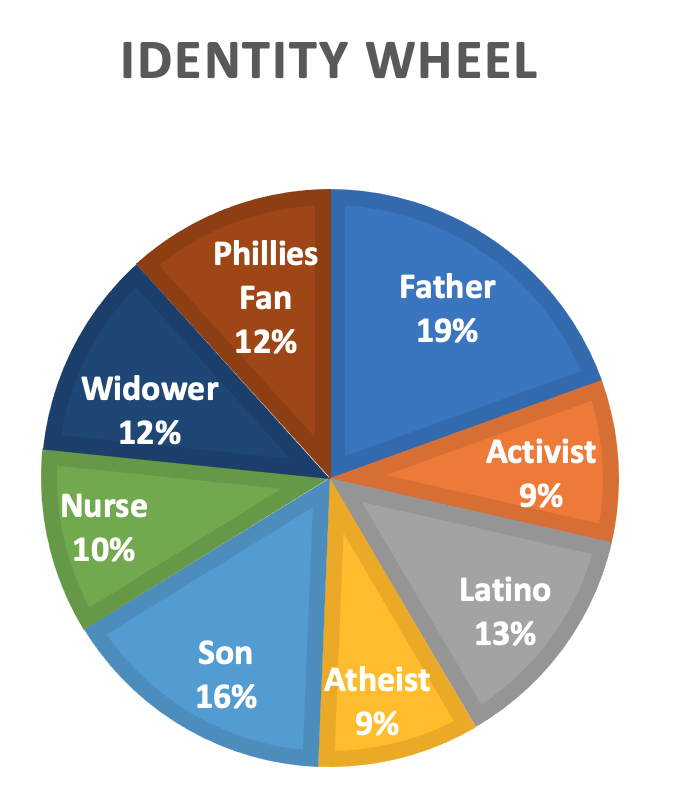
What is x’s greatest failure? (or deepest secret?)

Tell me x’s three magic wishes.

Bring your character to life with three sentences: one with a fact that everyone knows; one with a fact that only a few folks know; one with a fact that no one else knows.

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***Exercise 2: Identity Wheel***



It was Whitman who pointed out we all contain multitudes, and if you’ve ever been to a DEI training, they often begin with an illuminating exercise during which each person rattles off the labels applied to them or roles they value. That may be a worthwhile exploration for you to undertake with your character. How do they see themselves? Take a minute and create your own pie chart of identity, either with yourself or a character.

(Also, it’s worth noting that many stories derive from conflict between roles or when roles shift or change in some way. )

***Exercise 3***

***Character: Expected vs. Fresh (Avoiding Clichés)***

While clichés and flat characters might have a role in some stories, if your goal is to create realistic characters, they should be a blend of the expected and the fresh. No real person is a caricature. Often in life, when we learn more about someone, we come to see them as more human. Readers seeking human characters may quickly get turned off if all you offer is a series of expected details and expected behavior.

*In a single sentence, introduce a character and offer one expected detail (which in the worse case may be comically redundant) and one fresh one.*

Samantha the cafeteria lady yelled at the kids in line but each year showed up to graduation in a red dress.

Blake the bartender loves listening to people’s problems and giving advice but sometimes, behind that smile, he wants to tell them to shut up.

Eliana the dance instructor typically meditates and does half an hour of yoga each morning, but every now and then, she\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

As part of his bedtime routine, Reverend Colson reads his worn Bible every night and prays for guidance before \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

After leaving the comic book shop, where Ned the nerd loves debating if Marvel is better than DC with the owner, he goes \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

When Captain Thunder isn’t saving Alpha Town from his nemesis Lightning Lord, he \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Grandma Jones bakes cookies for the grandchildren and spoils them with a new toy each time they visit, but as soon as they leave, she \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Note: I’m reducing the movement/revelation that takes place over an entire story (even a book) here into a single sentence for purposes of illustration. What I mean is, it’s fine if after leaving the comic book shop Ned walks home and plays Dungeons and Dragons, but if later he watches a sci-fi movie and plans his trip to a comic book convention. Of course, Captain Thunder can return to his hideout and meet his sidekick, Cloudburst Boy. But as anticipated details pile up, the reader’s attention will start to lag. Readers benefit from details that verify and authenticate their impressions of a character, but they crave new information that expands their sense of who that person is.

\* Make a list of the cliché characters we’d find populating a mediocre film or book at a high school. Pick three and, as in the exercise, make them real in a single sentence, going beyond the stereotype.

***Exercise 4***

***Character: Revealing Action***

Action is the most potent of the modes of character revelation, the most dynamic shorthand for expression an impression. In life, just as actions speak louder than words, we judge people most succinctly based on what we observe them doing. In clear situations, your characters; actions will provide readers with a glimpse into the depth of their personalities. (Keep in mind too that we can consider dialogue a sort of action, so by all means, try that too.) Go beyond the obvious and bring the character to life!

When Ted’s boss at McDonald’s told he was fired, Ted\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

On his way home from his father’s wake, Donta\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

After Winston knelt in the sand and pulled out an engagement ring, Julia \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Fritz saw that his grocery cart had indeed cracked the taillight of the car next to his in the Giant parking lot, so he \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

When Coach Cramsey told Greg he was suspended for three games, he walked into the locker room and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

From the couch, Dana heard her toddler crying loudly from his crib just around 3 a.m., and she \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

“I hate you,” Fran said to his mother the day of his 14th birthday, to which she replied, “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

Just before he drove off for his freshman year of college, Todd made sure that he\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

***Exercise 5***

***Character: Dialogue & Code Talk***

We all talk in code, embedding our true intentions in simple language. In the charts below, one side is the actual dialogue spoken but the other is the hidden yet understood meaning. Have fun filling in the blanks.

*When a parent says: What they really mean is/What a teen hears is:*

“How was the party?” “Did you drink and do drugs?”

“I know you’re trying your best.” “I think you have to try harder.”

“I’m not telling you what to do.” “You have to do this.”

“Do you have a minute?” “I’m going to lecture you now.”

“What are doing this weekend?”

“How was your day?”

“I’m glad you have friends.”

“Your mother and I aren’t fighting.”

“I never talked to my parents this way.”

“I’m worried you’re not feeling safe.”

“I’m not sure what to do to help you.”

“I’m afraid.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“I want you to change your mind.”

“You’re making the wrong decision.”

\* Make a second chart exploring the code talk of friends.

\* Write a scene where people don't use code talk but instead blurt out exactly what they are feeling, leaving no room for interpretation. It’ll sound really odd (and that’s why your dialogue should sound a bit rough, even unpolished.)

\* Take a scene with a lot of dialogue in it and “unpack” each line, writing down what you understand the character to really be trying to express.