

Be Your Own Best Editor

I am at the tail end of a One Story course on self-editing your short stories. I've taken the material presented and some items from the discussion threads and turned them into a kind of checklist of things to look for when editing your fictional works.

You can find the link to a PDF of the current checklist on the ["Write Minded" page](#) where it says "Self-editing Checklist". It will likely get updated, so if you find it useful, you might want to check back now and then for a revised edition!

Lost and Found and the Story Spine

Today I started work on the second draft of my first novel. The first task I've decided to undertake is to review and revise the plot structure.

Recently I took a little course offered by the fine folks at [One Story](#). Ann Napolitano did a five day course entitled "Lost and Found: A New Way of Looking at Plot", which I highly recommend, by the way, if she offers it again. In the discussion forum for the course, I learned about [the "Story Spine" concept](#), which Ken Adams invented as a way to assist actors in improvisational theater and Pixar included in its "rules" for story development. I have begun my re-plotting effort by combining the technique Ann introduced with the Story Spine approach.

Lost and Found approaches plot from the perspective of what

the protagonist is “missing” and how the search for it develops and resolves. In a sense, you take the journey of discovery with the characters in the story as they seek to deal with the conflict by examining what it is that has them off-kilter to begin with. The “missing” thing can be a person, a thing, a feeling, ... anything.

The Story Spine goes like this, where you fill in the blanks:

Once upon a time _____,
until one day _____,
because of that _____,
because of that _____,
...
until finally _____,
and ever since that day _____.

I think in a novel you probably get some iterations over the because of that.../until finally sequences, but that's neither here nor there. It's a tool for grasping the bare minimum sequence of cause and effect that make the story.

What I noticed as I thought about Lost and Found and the Story Spine is how the quest for what is missing follows the Spine. So, identify what is missing, put the protagonist's paws on ground at “until one day” – the point at which it goes missing or can't be ignored – and your off and running. I tried it with a couple of short stories and it worked, so I figured I'd give it a go with the novel.

The novel is called “The Last Tanuki”. It takes place on a distant planet called Tereathon where the human/animal genetic hybrid inhabitants live deep beneath the uninhabitable surface in gigantic caverns. The story centers on Aria, a tanuki hybrid. She's a young adult and has been out on her own a few years.

The first thing to do was to identify what was missing. They are several:

- Aria's parents went missing when she was a pup (parents missing)
- Aria's step-parents are killed in the first chapter (step-parents missing)
- An attempt on Aria's life is made in the first chapter (Aria's security/safety is missing)
- Aria's Uncle Cato, who made unwelcome and inappropriate advances toward Aria when she was 13, shows up in league with those who made the attempt on her life, turning Aria's emotional state upside down (Aria's peace of mind is missing)
- Aria pretends to be a cross between two different genetic families of hybrids because tanuki are viewed with superstitious suspicion by others and are sometimes attacked. Crosses, though, are considered inferior, so she faces some kind of discrimination either way. (Aria is missing the acceptance and equality others have. She is also missing companionship)
- Those who made the attempt on her life are apparently looking for a map they think she has through her father (the map is missing)

Those are the main things. The goal of Lost and Found is to narrow that to the most important. I went one step further, though, and asked: what is missing? what does Aria believe is missing?

I have trouble with theme in stories. I could tell throughout the first draft that this book was struggling to find its message ([Dorothy Sayers would have said](#) I was not tuned in with the Idea). Anyway, as I thought about what was missing and why, a theme began to emerge: children suffering for the sins of their parents. This is actually most of the characters' problems, so I used it as a lens to examine what was missing, and one thing popped out above the others: the struggle for acceptance. Aria's situation in that context is nearly a microcosm of the entire world of Tereathon.

So it was pretty clear that the most important missing thing is acceptance of crosses and tanuki. The rest of the missing things just serve to provide events for Aria to deal with the real issue: discrimination and its affect on her. However, Aria only sees that as a fact of life in her world as a whole, and she grew up knowing nothing else, so she can't really see the forest for the trees. To Aria, the most important thing immediately missing is that map: only that can free her from the terror of her life. Minus the immediate threats, Aria would say the most important thing missing is her parents. Their motorcar was found having crashed, and while they are presumed dead, their bodies were never discovered. Aria, however, has always held out an impossible hope they might not be dead, though by the time the book takes place, it has been 16 years and her hope is almost extinguished.

That isn't a perfect analysis, but it's good for now. It provides a backdrop for the Story Spine.

Now in the original sequence of events, the story opens with the threat on Aria's life. The other precursors are revealed in changes in point of view and in flashbacks. I didn't like those very much, and by reaching back into the Story Spine of Aria's life: that is, just by starting off my thinking with "Once upon a time ... until one day ..." a whole world opened up. Another lesson I've heard in numerous places is to start your story deeper in on round two. I think a better way to put that is, consider starting your story some-when else. In this case I looked at it as Aria's story, and since the map and Aria's parents figure so prominently, maybe that is a good place to start. I wrote that, the original, and several other possible starting points down, and it was clear after a short time that the one that offered the most cohesive plot was to start with the events of her parents disappearance, but just as an action sequence that hints at the map and something of life on Tearathon. Given that point in time and space, I now had a "Once upon a time ..." and an "until one day ..." all based

on what Aria is missing and believes is missing:

Once upon a time, there was a tanuki/human genetic hybrid girl named Aria who lived with other animal/human hybrids known as animalians on a distant planet called Tereathon. Tanuki were treated with superstitious suspicion, and sometimes violence, and cross-hybrid family offspring were held in disdain. The surface of Tereathon was uninhabitable and for untold generations animalians had dwelled beneath the surface of the planet in massive underground caverns. The girl's parents went missing, their car found wrecked and abandoned, and were presumed dead. She was raised by step-parents who were not tanuki and thought it safer for her if she hid the patterns in her fur and passed herself off as a cross rather than live as a tanuki. This is how she grew up and the habits she developed.

Every day Aria went about her business, trying to keep a low profile so as not to offend "normal" animalians. She was content to just live quietly and get by in a world that treated her as less than equal and forced her to repress any expression of her true self.

Until one day her step-parents were killed in a suspicious factory fire and her uncle, who had molested her when she was 13, showed up, and she began receiving threats on her life along with demands for a map that had allegedly passed to her through her father.

Because of that, she discovered a connection between her father and an animalian who lived in town. She went to see him (Graowf) and his friend (Prox) to learn if they knew anything about her father and the alleged map.

Because of that, Graowf ...

And I'll stop there so I don't reveal anything. I will probably go back and revise the Spine, cutting it down to its core – it seems to wordy. I'll also construct a detailed

outline that follows and that I'll use for writing the second draft. Regardless of what I do, you see how the process is working for me. Lost and Found and the Story Spine seem to me quite useful tools for working a story plot. I'll post more on my thoughts about them as my novel progresses.

What tools do you use to help you develop story plots?

Hero's Journey in Three Act Structure

I've was recently reading Plot and Structure by James Scott Bell, and he has a nice outline of The Hero's Journey, or Mythic Structure in a Three Act format, which I paraphrase here:

I. Act I

1. Introduction to hero and his world
2. Disturbance that interrupts the hero's routine and/or a "call to adventure"
3. The hero may (typically) ignore the disturbance/call
4. The hero is coerced/enters into conflict with the dark forces [1st Doorway]

II. Act II

1. A mentor may appear to instruct/guide the hero
2. Encounters with the dark forces/a lot of muddling about/develop readers rapport/sympathy
3. Hero must confront a weakness or fear

or other ultimate low dark moment within himself that he must overcome.

4. A talisman, usually with supernatural power or significance, aids hero in battle
5. Final setup for the climactic conflict [2nd Doorway]

III. Act III

1. The climactic, final battle is fought in a total knockout, usually in defeat of the dark forces
2. The hero returns to the mundane in his own usual world

Their Ways

This page documents some things I found while reading other peoples' works that I think stood out as lessons in greatness or lessons in mistakes. I only cite authors if I quote them verbatim and if it's not so bad it might embarrass them :-0

Errors of Their Ways

- I read a short story in the first person where the narrator used phrases and words that the ordinary guy off the street would not. There was no indication of the narrator's profession, and nothing to indicate it had to do with word smithing, so the effect was to make the character himself unbelievable as a real person. Thus his interactions with others became purely academic.

Great Ways

Shining Quotes

Character Discovery Scenarios

Sometimes it is helpful to see how your character would handle being in different situations to get a better idea of who he/she is. Here are a few samples:

- Set your character up on a blind date
How does he/she react to the idea? What does he/she do to prepare? What happens on the date? Afterward?
- Have your character deal with engine failure in a remote area
Could be on an undeveloped section of interstate, or secluded rural road, or an uninhabited moon around some distant planet in another solar system. Could be his/her horse dies in a desert. How does he/she react? What does he/she do to get “back on the road”

I'd like more ideas for scenarios I can put here. Comment or email me (graowf@wolf.ishly.me) your candidates for inclusion.

Questions To Ask Your Character

Sometimes I talk to my characters. Here are some questions that you can ask your character to get the conversation going and discover more about him/her:

Questions for your character

- How do you feel about that?
- Why did you do that?
- What interests you about that?
- When did that develop in you?
- Where were you when that developed in you?
- Who influenced the development of that in you?

Consider preparing for and then conducting an interview with your character.

Now, place your character in various scenarios and see how he handles them. You can use [the ones I posted here](#), or invent your own.

Character Development Template

Here is a template, in the form of a set of questions, for understanding a character when you first meet him/her. At the bottom I've linked to the sources for a few of the questions and references to some resources on this topic.

Basics

Full name:

Species:

Age: How old is he? (And how old is he mentally? Is he a 40 year old in the body of a sixteen year old, or vice versa?)

Birthday: Day/Month? Year or age-as-of year?

Education:

Physical description: What does he look like? What distinguishing physical traits does he have?

Present situation (where he lives, how he makes a living, his social condition):

Childhood/history/future: Did he have a happy childhood? Why/why not? OR What will he be like in 20 years?

Past/ present relationships? How did they affect her?

Life's "defining moment"?

Motivation

What is the character's archetype (see 4+ below)?

What does he care about?

What is he obsessed with?

What's missing (physical, psychological, social)?

What MUST he do? What does he THINK he MUST do?

Biggest fear?

What makes him courageous?

What is his greatest strength? Weakness? Flaws?

What is the best thing that ever happened to her? The worst?

Most embarrassing thing that ever happened to her?

Biggest secret?

Does he have any grudges?

How does the presence of other characters or group situations affect him?

What is the one word you would use to define her?

What is his religious life like?

What are his idiosyncracies?

How does he show/react to:

- anger?
- happiness?
- envy?
- love?
- etc....

NOTE: find ways to make reactions surprising yet logical. For example: a character who is slightly claustrophobic might feel trapped living in a remote, country setting. Why? Because there is no immediately attainable safety net, the character sees no escape if there is some kind of urgent need for medical care or water or whatever. Thus the character feels trapped even out in the wide open space.

Some articles on this topic:

(1)

<http://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/how-to-write-a-plausible-character-3-key-tips>

(2)

<http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-ag>

[ents/agent-donald-maass-on-your-tools-for-character-building](#)

(3)

<http://www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/by-writing-goal/improve-my-writing/8-ways-to-write-better-characters>

(4)

<http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/there-are-no-rules/how-to-use-archetypes-in-literature-when-creating-characters-for-your-novel>

(5) <http://listology.com/list/character-archetypes>

(6) <http://www.jillwilliamson.com/teenage-authors/jills-list-of-character-archetypes/>

Writing

Tips/Pointers/Reminders

Here are some tips, pointers, and reminders I find useful to keep close while writing. I put them here in the hopes that at least one will be helpful to you ...

This page changes at the drop of a hat as I find something useful to add, and I just add the new content quickly, so keep that in mind ...

Some of these are my own, some are my rephrasing/reinterpretations of things I've found elsewhere ...

...

While writing:

- Show, don't tell
Instead of explicit explanations, let character actions, reactions, environment, etc., reveal meaning and facts

- Make heavy use of subtext. “Befriend ambiguity”
Related to “Show, don’t tell”, assume your reader is intelligent enough to figure it out on his/her own from hints
- Don’t repeat yourself
Don’t describe things the same way consecutively, especially avoid using the same word over and over.
- Make triangles, especially in relationships
Add the other person, interest, or even story interact with the current situation and characters
- When writing in the first person, choose the narrator that has the voice that fits the story
Narrator with the right voice will enhance the story. The wrong voice will stifle and kill it.
- Delve on each character’s motivations and idiosyncracies at every opportunity.
Explore why characters do little things; let characters do little things that reveal something about themselves
- Ask “Why?” on every paragraph.
Don’t let a logic error or motivational error slip in. Don’t let an opportunity for depth slip by.
- Create people, not characters
Love and hate them. They will love and hate you back.
- Bring out character personality in physical description.
Example: “... a plump, awkward 11 year old with a carefree gap-toothed grin and a halo of unruly blond hair.”
(credit to Feiona Addams). The physical description embodies personality traits: I get the impression of a cute, sweet girl with a tomboyish streak. By the end of the story, I can see those traits in her, but maturing into their teenage equivalencies emerge in her behavior.
- Express abstractions in terms of the concrete environment.
This also helps establish mood. Instead of saying, “A knock echoed through the door. Cato had come. Reality intruded, and dread froze her to her bed, hugging her pillow”, I might say, “A knock echoed through the door.

Cato had come. A cold breeze through the window beset the candle on the table and quinched the flame, and dread froze her to her bed, hugging her pillow.”

- Express a characters feelings or state of mind by demonstration.

Akin to show, don't tell, use a characters behavior, or what he notices and thinks about things around him to express his feelings and state of mind. For example, instead of “She grew more agitated as the evening wore on and became more and more distracted”, I might say, “As evening faded into night, she alternately paced the room nervously and sat staring blankly into the crackling fire, unable to rehearse the speech she'd prepared because of the nerve-wracking scenarios assaulting her out of her imagination.”

- Make it personal.

Turn objective description into personalized experience.

E.g., instead of “because of the nerve-wracking scenarios assaulting her out of her imagination”, I might say, “because she could not stop his violent assaults in the scenarios playing always inevitably to a furious final act of rage.”

- Connect readers to characters before you ask them to hang out together.

Make the opening excite the reader in some way so that they willingly invest in the characters before you present a slow point to delve deeper.

- Make your prose poetic

Use poetic constructions in prose

The practice of writing:

- Find your soundtrack

Music affects you in a way nothing else does. Find music that fits what you are writing.

- Write, re-write, and re-write again

You must rewrite, then rewrite with a critical eye, then

do it some more. Be ruthless on yourself.

- Maintain a character profile template and tools to help discover your characters

Each character should end up with a scrapbook about his life: little stories, photos, memorabilia. Central is a profile sheet that describes the foundational characteristics (physical, emotional, intellectual) that form him. NOTE: I have started using three tools in parallel: Protagonist (and usually others) Character Profile + the Story Spine + Lost and Found

- Reference materials are your friends. No reader is going to give you points for not having used a thesaurus.
- Rethink the starting point of the story. Often, after writing a story, it makes a more engaging start to restructure it so that it opens deeper into the story. You can always use a flashback or other exposition technique to re-capture the skipped facts.
- Trust your reader and his/her intelligence. You don't have to say "The phone rang, and Bob stood up and walked across the room, picked up the receiver and said, 'Hello.' It was Billy." You can just say "The phone rang. It was Billy." The reader can figure out what Bob did to find out it was Billy.

Beyond the writing:

- Connect, engage, celebrate, and lament with other writers

This is how you build and experience the craft. Cheer them on when they succeed, encourage them when they fail, offer to help and support, ask for their help and support

- Surround yourself with supportive friends.

Keep people around who will lovingly kick you when you are down and knock you down when you are up. These are the people you can trust that help keep you level and

balanced.

- Only practice makes perfect

No number of classes, lectures, books, or psychics will make you a better writer, only writing makes you a better writer.

- Live the world as a narrative.

When I was in college learning to be a programmer, I executed all my mundane tasks by stepping through an algorithm. "Grip lid, do twist_counter-clockwise() until (resistance==0), etc..." Now that I have decided to learn to be a writer, I often will describe my own life's moments as I live them as if in a story, "He walked briskly up the hillside, the chill spring atmosphere making him briskier, because the cold reality of time waits for no man"

- Write all the time, even when you aren't writing

Turn a poetic phrase even in a Tweet. Write a story plot in narrative form on a napkin. Churn out a campy poem while you are waiting in the parking lot for your spouse because choir practice that is running late. You can do this even without a pen and paper: see "Live the world as a narrative"

- Twitter @sesever: "DID YOU KNOW? If you make the 1st #ebook in a series free, you'll sell 8 times more copies of subsequent volumes #writing"

Considering for inclusion in one of the above lists:

- Be ready to cut the parts you skip when you re-read, but clip them into a folder where you keep scraps.

Read your stuff and if you find yourself skipping something because you can't wait to get to the next paragraph, cut what you skip. Don't let it get away, though: if you feel attached to it, put it in a folder so you don't lose it. Maybe you'll never use it. Maybe it'll become something of its own. Maybe it'll get inserted in something else.

- Don't read unsolicited reviews, but if you do, be humble and objective and learn from them, don't take them personally.

Critical reviews (you don't ask for) can really put you on the defensive and upset you, so just don't read reviews. But if you do, go into it expecting to be hurt and steel your nerves determined not to be. Put aside the desire to defend and make yourself agree – at least for a moment – with the reviewer. Learn the truth, discard the lies.

- Introduce your character's strengths and weaknesses from the start

In a novel, in the first five pages. In short stories, in the first few paragraphs.

- "Make 'em laugh and break their *****' hearts. Accomplish that and your doing pretty good." ~ Mark Richard to Matt Sumell
 - What does whatever character A just said/did touch in characters B and/or C? Especially indirects. Like death of lonely elderly neighbor making a woman think about protecting her own unborn child against her death.
 - What do supporting characters represent/symbolize about the main character/subject?
 - Every detail of life is a story prompt
 - In a story, an unrelated detail should server to answer: "What do I want to bring out here?" They might relate two otherwise unconnected memories, for example.
 - Don't miss an opportunity to let a character be confronted with his own internal loose ends – especially as a response to other, external things.
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Write Minded

Here I'm going to drop links to helpful pointers, tips, lessons, and tools for better writing that I have learned or picked up here and there and along the way of whatever way I am on. Since most of my writing is fiction and poetry, these are focused primarily on those genres.

I'm always interested in **constructive** comments, suggestions, references to resources, etc. Comment here or email me at graowf@wolf.ishly.me

[Collected Tips, Pointers, Reminders](#)

[Character Profile and Discovery Template](#)

[Questions to Ask Your Character](#)

[Character Discovery Scenarios](#)

[Self-editing Checklist](#)

[Lessons Learned and Examples from the Writings of Others](#)

["The Hero's Journey" Outlined in a Three Act Structure](#)

External Links

The Character Profile template has links to lists of character archetypes.

[Mythical Archetypes list](#) is a list of archetypes commonly found in fairy tales and the like.

[Plot Devices](#) Wikipedia article on major techniques of plot development

["Seven Basic Plots"](#) Wikipedia article on major plot archetypes

["Thirty-six Dramatic Situations"](#) Wikipedia article on situations found in dramatic stories and such

[Monomyth](#) Wikipedia also has a detailed article about the stages of the hero's journey

[Crafting Characters Scene By Scene](#) is a really good article on using scene and action in character development

[Sara Pennypacker's List of Books about Writing](#)