

Novels In Progress, 2006
Instructor's Letter
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Every teaching year, I write an informal letter to my students, addressing the main issues I've found in the stories I'm critiquing. I figure if I add to it every year and then cut out the parts that don't make any sense, I'll eventually have a "How To" book.

Possibly a very short one.

Here's this year's version:

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1. No problem is just one kind of problem.

Every weakness is a weakness in more than one way. A problem with "characterization" turns out to be, coincidentally, where the plot also happens to lose track of itself. Lack of sufficient description is also where character voice disappears.

That means several things. First, it means a story is a unified whole, and that discussing "plot," "character," and "setting" as though they are separate is a mistake.

Second, it means there's more than one way to attack the problem. In the case of insufficient description, it

would be easy to say, "Put in more description!" However, it might prove as fruitful to say, "You've missed a chance to let your point-of-view character tell us how she sees the world."

This may go partway toward explaining why I'm probably contradicting other authors from whom you may have had advice, and why the next author you consult will contradict me: Sometimes, it's because somebody's actually wrong, but it's also possible that we're all seeing the same weakness, and simply approaching from the particular angle with which we're most comfortable. We see the same problems, but solve them differently. So if more than one reliable source complains, but they're complaining about different things, try to figure out the root cause of the symptoms they're pointing out. In many cases, since plot and description often come from character, the problem will be with the people you've invented.

This relates strongly to something I believe, which is:

2. Good writing does more than one thing at a time.

If too many passages are *only* about setting, or *only* about character, or *only* about plot, not only does the story move slowly (or fail to move at all), but all kinds of opportunities are missed. In a passage of straight description of setting, the opportunity to illuminate the point-of-view character's personality is lost; in a passage

of straight character history, the opportunity to advance the plot is lost. Some of the writing I admire most accomplishes more than one thing at a time; it's an efficiency of craft that becomes invisible when it's mastered.

Can you do just one thing sometimes? Sure, it's your story. You can do whatever you want. I like what EM Forster said of point-of-view changes in *Aspects of the Novel*: You can do it *if it comes off*.

3. Ineffective writing isn't necessarily the result of doing things wrong; it's usually the result of missing opportunities.

Look for places to be interesting, unusual, unexpected, efficient, galvanizing, heartbreaking, funny, intriguing, clever, provocative, evocative. If it suits your style, try writing (as Raymond Chandler said, though I can't confirm the quote) "something delightful in every paragraph."

If you don't, you may be getting a lot out of writing your book, but what am I getting out of reading it?

4. "Show, don't tell" really is a common problem.

I hate it when "how to write" books command the writer to "show, don't tell," because it's a rule, and I hate those. However, after having read innumerable manuscripts in which it's a real problem, I feel forced to say it should be something a writer should *choose* to ignore as she wishes, not

something the writer just doesn't have a handle on.

I'm pro-*tell*. I like being *told* when it's the most efficient way to get a piece of information across, or there's some other reason it's a better choice than *show*, like when showing a character doing something just doesn't pinpoint the character's thoughts or feelings at that moment. A well-placed "tell" can sometimes send it home in a way a "show" can't. *The Brothers Karamazov* is a great book, and it's got entire chapters of "tell." Elmore Leonard cuts out entire scenes and replaces them with "tells"--and it works.

However.

They also know the difference and use each to its best advantage.

Showing lets the reader observe your character and draw a conclusion, the same as we do in our everyday lives. We see someone do something, we make a judgment. Telling doesn't allow the reader to draw a conclusion; it *is* the conclusion. The reader has less of an opportunity to engage with the story, because it's already laid out for her--and that's what you want your reader to do: engage. A reader wants not just understand what you're saying, but to cooperate in making the story live in her mind. If you're leaving no room for that participation--"collaboration" isn't too strong a word--you're denying the reader a big part of the enjoyment.

It's your job to lay out the dots. It's the reader's job to connect them. Nothing's less fun than a connect-the-

dots puzzle that somebody else has already completed.

Nothing's inherently wrong with telling; nothing's inherently wrong with showing. Know the difference, and choose according to whether you need to engage or inform at this particular moment in the narrative. When Picasso paints a canvas using only blue, you can still tell that he knows what he's doing with color. When I paint a canvas using only blue, you will be quite certain from the result that it's because I have no clue what to do with red or yellow--and you won't be too sure I've got a grip on blue, either.

Learn all the colors; then choose whichever seems right at the moment. Master the whole craft.

5. It's hard to understand what's your story and what isn't.

Ted is six-one. He comes from a small town in Michigan, about fifty miles from Detroit. He has one sister, Theresa, who married Ted's best friend, Walter. On a Wednesday morning in July, Ted walks into a bar with his dog, Rex. Rex is a retriever, but, interestingly enough, has never been good at retrieving; when the gun goes off, Rex looks at Ted and barks. He has a little nick out of one ear.

The bar Ted walks into has been there for sixty-five years, having gone through a series of owners, openings, closing, and depressions major and minor. In the summer of 1962, Fabian once stopped in, sweaty and irritated because his bus had broken down on the frotage road, and his bass

player was stoned senseless, and they weren't going to make it to Ronkonkema in time for the Up With People concert. The bartender, Steve, whose father was a bartender before him in this same place (Steve says a prayer for him every morning), says in a gravelly voice, "Hey, we don't allow dogs in here. There's a sign outside, but apparently you missed it. I need to get a new sign, but I've been busy with the tax audit. It's like a guy can't even make a little money without the government taking it away." Steve's father had been the bartender on duty when Fabian had stopped in. He'd had tax problems, too.

Dogs are related to cats if you go back far enough on the evolutionary chain. Sometimes Ted thinks he can see a little feline genetic influence in the way Rex can sometimes become aloof.

Ted smiles the same smile that got him a free beer last week. But that was a different bartender. And a different bar, now that he thinks of it. He was already drunk that other time. He points at Rex with the stump of the second finger on his left hand, the hand that's not holding the leash. He lost the finger last year in a lawnmower accident, and he bought Rex right around that same time. "This is a talking dog," he says.

I won't go through the whole joke. (The dog looks up and says, "DiMaggio?") But here's the point: Everything in a joke is there because it *has* to be there. Too much stuff, and the setup/punchline relationship gets blurred. Nobody

knows what they're supposed to be paying attention to; the joke isn't sharp; the audience's attention wanders; the punchline doesn't punch; nobody laughs. On the other hand, too little information, like this:

This guy has a dog. The dog says, "DiMaggio?"

...doesn't make enough sense to be funny. It's the same punchline--but it has no context, and therefore no setup.

So when you're telling a joke, you have to keep in mind, "What is this joke about?" People who don't tell jokes well don't know how to do this.

Similarly, when you're telling a story, you have to keep in mind, "What is this story about?" You don't need to cut every little thing that doesn't directly move the plot, but you do need to be aware of where you're going. If you're not someone who outlines in advance (I'm not), then you need to think about this during your rewrites, whether that means your daily perusal of yesterday's work or your major overhauls "per draft."

If you can't identify how a certain piece of dialogue or description moves the story, it's probably just decoration. Decoration is important. It's what makes a Christmas tree not just some dead, brown bush somebody dragged into the living room--but it's the easier part, because a lot of it is just a matter of taste. In these critiques, I try to concentrate on structural, functional elements. There's still a degree of taste there, but there are also things that simply do or don't make sense.

6. If you can identify the function of a scene, it's easier to solve your problems.

Seeing your novel as a series of scenes, each of which has some sort of concrete purpose that you can articulate, can be helpful when trying to figure out how to attack problems.

For example, figuring out which dialogue to cut becomes clear when you know what the scene is for--you just cut whatever dialogue doesn't agree with that function. Same with description, narrative, and everything else; there's always going to be stuff that you keep because it's fun, or chilling, or sad, or interesting, even if it doesn't directly contribute to the scene's function--but when you keep the scene's function in mind while you're cutting, it becomes easier to recognize what's expendable and what's not, and you'll start making the choices that make the scene feel taut.

Of course, this means you have to do some work first: You have to decide what that function is, and that's not always easy. But once you know that answer, a lot of smaller problems almost solve themselves.

My outlook as a writer is a little different from my position as a writing instructor. As a writer, I think anything can be art, and art is largely ineffable. As soon as you think you have a handle on what makes successful art, somebody makes something that contradicts everything you'd

figured out--and it's successful, dammit. However, as a writing instructor, my assumption is *We are here to tell a story*. That assumption gives me something teachable: craft. Without it, there's nothing I can teach except "trust yourself."

Which is, of course, also valuable.

7. You're here to evoke, not just inform.

Part of how novels are different from screenplays is the extent to which the people and environments can be evoked. A great screenplay description might give one or two details the first time a location is encountered. After that, it's been described; the production designer knows what it looks and feels like and will design the set accordingly.

In a novel, if you're not keeping your readers' senses informed, you may be missing opportunities to engross your audience. Movies have all kinds of ways of keeping viewers interested besides the basics of compelling story and good dialogue--they have music, lighting, camera work, shot flow, and so on. Each of those things requires several expert artists and a support staff. In a novel, there's just you; you have to be the one who really makes the reader feel he's in the scene. If you're not naturally a visual thinker, learn to be one. Practice it. If you can't visualize the entire scene, neither can your reader. This may not be a problem for you--after all, if you're not a visual thinker,

you're not a visualizing reader, either--but many of your readers may experience a strange lack of engagement. Not only that, but you likely have some physically improbable things going on, just because you don't know where all your fictitious objects are.

If you're not used to thinking in terms of the other senses, learn to do that too. Sensory descriptions are tools for tricking your reader's imagination into believing it's really experiencing your story. You might even think of it as plugging your own data into your reader's eyesight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, temperature, and balance. Our real senses are how we know about the real world; and our fictional senses are how we know about fictional worlds. Your readers' are already there, waiting to be used. Use them.

Learning to do this can be as simple as learning to pay attention to things you don't usually bother to notice. You're here to do more than *inform*. You're also here to entertain and to *transport*. If you want readers to really feel it, give them things to really feel.

If you're trying to do one of those boffo international thriller things that stays on the New York Times list for twelve decades because people who don't usually read are reading it, it may not matter how finely you feed your readers' senses. All anybody cares about in that case are the broad strokes of the story; you can write cardboard dialogue and slather it in clichés, and it's okay because

you've got a page-turner of a plot and an audience with a taste for just that.

I'm the wrong guy to teach you how to do that stuff. I care even less about it than I care about celebrity romances. Sorry.

8. Clichés

There are two basic views. One says "The goal of writing is to communicate, and everyone understands clichés." Another says "The goal of writing is to make the reader see things anew, and that's impossible with a cliché." I'm in the latter camp--with the occasional exception when it feels right and I can't find an alternative that feels righter.

I don't like rules, and "don't use clichés" is one. Rules are necessary in, say, engineering, but in engineering, there really are wrong ways to do things. If you're building a house, margarine is the wrong choice for your foundation material. Don't use it. This is a rule that exists for a good reason. You should not break it.

In art, though, it's whatever works. No matter what the rule, somebody can ignore it and get a good result. You can do it *if it comes off*. But here's my best reason for avoiding clichés whenever possible:

You want the reader engaged and paying attention. Nobody really pays attention to things they've heard a

thousand times before.

9. Hide and Seek

Some new writers love to withhold information so they can give the reader a surprise later. This is not necessarily a bad thing in all cases, but it can mean the reader is being denied the chance to enjoy the book *now*. It might also mean you're relying too much on the idea of surprising the reader later instead of entertaining the reader now.

The Sixth Sense was built around the idea of hiding information (in plain sight) and then springing it on the viewer at the end. The entire movie is structured around this plan, and it works.

If you're hiding information, the question I'd ask is *why?*

If the answer is that you're writing a story with a twist ending--like *The Sixth Sense*--and all the hidden information builds toward it *in concretely identifiable ways*, then you may be fine.

If the answer is "I just like surprises," then you may be reducing the dramatic impact of your story by sacrificing an interesting story now for a structurally meaningless surprise later.

It's an easy trap to fall into. For some reason, we think springing a gotcha on the reader will make them go "Wow!" But it often doesn't work out that way; by the time

we get to the surprise, we've had to slog through too much that wasn't interesting on its own.

And then--often--the surprise serves no identifiable purpose. So first there's a slog, and then there's no payoff.

Okay, so you got me. Big deal.

If this is one of your bad habits, the solution is simple: If you've got something interesting, use it sooner instead of later.

10. Sometimes what gets a book published isn't how well it's crafted.

Instead, there's a spark someplace--the language, the characters, the situations--and it just happens to catch the right tone at the right cultural moment. This does happen; it's a real force in the novel business. Unfortunately, I can't teach you to predict lightning strikes, so you're stuck with what I do know.

Thanks for trusting me with your story.

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How this critique works

My assumption is that your reason for attending NIPW is to improve, so I focus on things I think need work rather than finding places to praise the manuscript.

Take what helps; leave the rest. No writing instructor is omniscient. Catch us on two different days, and we may even give you two different opinions. We're mostly in this odd position of guruship because we've been published, but one of the drawbacks of success is that it validates both your good ideas and your bad ones. So if you hear something from an instructor that just doesn't seem real, maybe it's not. (And if the critique focuses on you, rather than on your manuscript, get your money back.)

Regarding your synopsis, I read it last. One reason is that often, there's stuff in the synopsis that doesn't appear in the manuscript. While you're working on your synopsis, you're forcing yourself to think about what your story is, so the synopsis will sometimes have more direction and structure than what ends up on the manuscript page.

It may also explicitly state things that ought to be in the manuscript but aren't, such as the gender of the narrator. If I read the synopsis first, I have "he" or "she" in my head already, and may miss the fact that in the manuscript, it's 60 pages before we get that information.

Why you're not getting a marked-up manuscript back

Because you wouldn't understand the weird notes I made on it. My thoughts are organized in a coherent form in the critique I give you. They're completely disorganized in the scribbles I made on paper--and often I'll disagree with half of them by the time I'm done thinking. You'd go nuts trying to figure out what they meant--not to mention wonder what kind of idiot you just paid good money to.

Why I'm not line-editing

In most cases, you're here because you've got a manuscript that you're not entirely happy with. Usually, the source of your unhappiness will be something structural: A plot that doesn't happen, a character who's not really a person yet, an incompletely thought-out thing of some sort.

Line-editing doesn't make sense in that context; there's no point agonizing over a single line if the entire chapter might be cut during your next revision. A story with structural problems is like a car with six side-view mirrors, one wheel, and twelve front seats; we can work on polishing each of the mirrors, and congratulate each other on how nice the seat leather is, but how much good is that really going to do when what the car needs is three more wheels, eleven fewer front seats, and an engine?

My first concern is getting the car running. After that, we can talk about interior appointments and paint

color choices. So usually, my critiques are going to be about larger-scale elements. Once those things are in line, we can talk smaller-scale stuff, because then we'll be working on sentences and paragraphs that have a better chance of surviving large-scale structural changes.

In my second book, there's a chapter in which a house has been ransacked and the people living there get upset. I worked it, polished it, tweaked it...then I realized that the house doesn't actually get ransacked at all, and the whole chapter got junked.

Since we only have a week, let's do what gets us the farthest. This may or may not be the perfect approach, but it's the one that seems most sensible to me. I'll start with the largest issues I see and work from there. (And obviously, if the story already seems to hang together, we'll look at smaller-scale stuff.)

If you have specific things you want to talk about, bring them up. Just because I have a plan of attack, that doesn't mean you shouldn't get your questions answered. And you've lived with your manuscript a lot longer than I have.

Every instructor at this workshop is mortal and fallible. Take what rings uncomfortably true and leave the rest.

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