

WRITERS GOTTA WRITE: NOVELS

By Jill Marshall

Advice from a well-published author, and many authored publisher

A how-to guide on writing novels of all kinds

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Jill Marshall is the best-selling author of the seven-book Jane Blonde ® series for girls, with readers in more than twenty countries and ten different languages.

With fiction from picture books to adult novels published by Penguin, Macmillan and Hachette over the past seven years, she has first-hand experience of an author's life.

Building on her background in HR/Training and Development, a couple of Masters' Degrees and a decade in writing coaching, Jill established her own publishing company in 2011 to support authors from first words to publication.

When not writing, teaching, coaching, editing and publishing, Jill lies on a sofa with a cold flannel over her eyes. She likes dancing, acting, singing and talking, and one day will summon up the energy to do at least one of them again (apart from talking, which she does all the time).

Jill divides her time between the sofa and her desk.

Go to www.jillmarshall.co for more information about Jill's books, training and coaching and publishing company.

Introduction

I am a novelist. I'm known mostly as a children's author, and yet I declare to anyone who cares to listen that I am a novelist.

I write other things like picture books, too, but mainly I'm a novelist.

I also write commercial fiction for women (and brave men who don't mind picking up what appears to be a chick read, but might actually contain a thriller). Yes, they are novels too.

Many writers are afraid of telling people they are writing a novel. The instant assumption is that it has to be a literary masterpiece with the potential for awards. If there is to be a film, ever, then it would star Daniel Day Lewis in the black and white version, shot at odd angles against a brooding soundtrack.

Well, yes, those are novels, for sure. A novel is a work of fiction, and that definition includes literary masterpieces.

However, it also includes children's books that have chapters in them. Young adult dystopia. Chick lit. Thrillers, ghost stories, sci-fi, historical fiction, romance ... all novels. Every one of them.

If you've ever wanted to write one or more of this type of book, you are writing a novel. Don't be afraid to say it.

Don't be afraid, either, of the images that 'writing a novel' conjures up. You don't need an English Literature degree, a twisted and tormented soul, or a chilly garret to write in. You can write your novel at a kitchen table, between sane and chirpy chats with your friends, using your pretty good grasp of whatever language you choose to write in.

I've had a very good education. The kind of education, in fact, that eighteen-year-olds - or their parents - dream of, all around the world. I have not one, but two Master of Arts degrees, and I'm considering a doctorate.

Yet still, I write and read children's books, chick lit, lad lit, thrillers, and just the occasional literary masterpiece. I read and write these novels because I choose to, not because I'm incapable of reading or writing the other kind of novel.

Similarly, I've found that a great deal of the teaching that goes into 'novel writing' in an academic sense is not that useful when trying to piece your novel together. You're not penning literary criticism; you're writing a book. A good one. The kind of book you'd love to read.

Here's where my book (non-fiction, so not a novel!) can help. It's a tool kit. Nuts and bolts. Spanners, clamps and planes. Hopefully, by the end, you'll have a good idea of how to write your novel, in whatever way you wish to, for whatever purpose you have identified as important.

Your tools.

Your choices.

Your novel.

I'm a novelist, too. Look forward to welcoming you into the group.

Jillx

www.jillmarshall.co

PS Because many children's books are novels, too, there is some cross-over between the material in this book and my guide on writing books for children.

However, some of the information is specific to each, so it is worth reading WRITERS GOTTA WRITE: CHILDREN'S BOOKS for more information on children's characters, age ranges etc. I've kept the price low so you can afford both!

PPS There is very different information in WRITERS GOTTA WRITE: PICTURE BOOKS if you're interested in writing books for very young children.

Chapter 1: That's very novel

So you've finally given in. That gnawing aggravation that's chewed away at your stomach lining for years, causing you sleepless nights every time you've just finished a book and thought to yourself, 'I'd love to do that.'

Or: 'I think I could do that.'

Or even: 'Duh. I could have done a way better job than that.'

You want to write a novel. It doesn't matter which of the above statements applies to you (and it's bound to be at least one, if not elements of all three!); your desire to write a novel has probably been simmering away for some time, maybe even years. Decades. For many, many people, it is a long held goal to one day 'write a book.'

Unlike many, many people, however, you have actually done something about it. You've taken a step towards the fulfilment of a dream. It's possible, of course, that this is someone else's dream for you, rather than something you would have dared articulate yourself. Not *aloud* at any rate.

It's okay, I've been there. I knew as a child that one day I would write books, but then life took over as it is wont to do. I found myself in career I loved, training and developing others, but not doing much creative writing.

Then I went through something that I'm sure many of you will recognise, even if does sound a little Kafka-esque ...

I found a hole. It started off being a hole in my chest, somewhere around my sternum. Then it spread, and things started falling into it: my concentration, my ability to stop myself day-dreaming, my willingness to go into the office and do the same job day after day, much as I loved it.

Eventually I stepped into the hole and for a very brief time - just a few days - I became really quite depressed. This surprised me greatly, as I was happy with life in general, and I'm reasonably cheerful most of the time.

Finally, I had an 'aha' moment. It was to be the first of many 'aha' moments that I have had since then, only nowadays they tend to be in the form of revelations for my books. 'Ah, *that's* why I stuck that can of beans on that shelf.' 'Oh my life, I've just realised who that character is - she's the first ever television presenter I saw!' You know the kind of thing. If you don't, you *will* know the kind of thing, where it becomes apparent that some greater force than you is somehow helping you to write this book and set it up properly.

Anyway, this 'aha' moment was a pivotal second or two in my life. I realised that the reason I was feeling blue and unfulfilled was that I wasn't being *creative*. Sure, I got to dream up training programmes and 'blue sky' divisional development strategies and so on, but I never got to detach myself completely from the real world and immerse myself in the many deep pools of ideas and idle speculation that sloshed gently around in my head.

Once I'd stepped into the hole, had a good look around, and put a name on it (The Cave of YouShouldBeWriting), it suddenly became a lot more comfortable. Daunting, yes, as I had done no more than decide that I must finally get back to that deeply-embedded wish to write books, but at least it was now manageable.

I didn't give up the job instantly. Eventually, I did, but not at this stage. What I did was give in to the craving. I took practical steps to leave the cave and enter the sunny glade of 'I AM writing'.

After reading a book or two on the subject, I did a distance-learning writing course. It arrived in an A4 envelope each week, and I'd send off my hand-written scribbles to an anonymous address every few weeks. It gave me courage to know that one day - maybe sooner than I thought - I could write a novel. Finally, after several false starts, I embarked on my second Master's degree, this time in Creative Writing, and eventually wrote a whole novel. It was to be the first of many. And I haven't stopped yet.

So I applaud whoever pushed you into this, whether it was your own willpower or wish, or the heart-felt support of a loved one. You've bought the ticket. You're on the platform. And you're about to set off on the journey of your life.

Why a novel?

Why do you want to write a book, rather than start a blog ... do journalism ... create instruction manuals? These are all outlets for writing, so maybe they would do the trick.

Perhaps not. Perhaps you have this kind of thought in your head as you ponder this question:

I've had this story building in my head for years and I'm not really sure where it's going, but I'd like to write it down and get it out of my system;

Something happened to me, and when I told my family/friends/class at school about it they all said it would make a great book, so now I'd like to write it;

I love reading, I adore beautiful language and challenging words, and I'd love to put them all together into a dense, rich, intense novel;

I've got a story that I think might make a good film script, but I don't know much about film/TV writing so I thought I'd write it as a novel first;

Novels make more money, I've heard.

There is no right or wrong answer (apart from maybe the last one, and for more on that please check out my why-to book on writing and publishing in the 21st Century, the original WRITERS GOTTA WRITE!).

However, they might all dictate the kind of book you think you would like to write. I stress the point 'think you would like to write' because you may find that what you end up writing is not at all what you would have predicted for yourself. If that happens, my advice would be to go with it! It's usually for a reason ...

Let's break those thoughts down, just in case they reflected some of your own.

I've had this story building in my head for years and I'm not really sure where it's going, but I'd like to write it down and get it out of my system

If you're in this situation, and many of us are - in fact, I'm in a constant state of needing to write books to get them out of my system - then you're probably almost ready to go. I'm willing to bet that you've even tried to start it before. Perhaps you sat down, spun out those first few paragraphs, pages, even chapters ... and then stopped short.

At this point you will probably have scratched your head, stared at the ceiling, then sighed and stuffed your computer or notebook away. Why did you ever think you could write a novel anyway? WHY? Now you're even more mad at yourself because you feel as though you've just failed to do this thing that you were sure, somehow, you would be good at.

Fear not. The problem is not you or your writing ability. It's the fact that you don't know where it's going. While some people can and do write in this way, with no idea where they're heading with it and just willing to let the muse take them, in my experience it's the fear of having no idea of your final destination that prevents people from getting there. It's like being kidnapped and locked in the boot of a car - a few miles down the road and the terror at not knowing where you're being taken would have you screaming, kicking out the reversing lights and flagging down the nearest car with your shoe-less foot ... anything to get you out of there.

So we will look at this throughout the book. We'll help you identify your destination. Then, as my wise friend and much-published novelist Kelly McKain once said, 'Once I know the route, I can enjoy the journey.'

Something happened to me, and when I told my family/friends/class at school about it they all said it would make a great book, so now I'd like to write it down

Actual experiences *can* lead to great novels. However, whether this was your amazing trip across the Serengeti, your experience of single-handedly bringing up ninety children in a shoe, or what happened to your marriage when your partner changed gender, you do have to remember that writing down your experiences exactly as they happened is rather like showing everyone your holiday snaps. The first few are interesting, and then they all get a bit samey. After that, your visitors are pretty convinced you've actually just started again at the beginning; haven't they seen that one before?

That may be a little over the top as an analogy for your story-telling, but we've all been

through these events in our life that held us in their grip for months or years, and while our friends are happy to listen to us go on about them for the first few weeks, we notice their eyes start to glaze over when we mention it the next time, and eventually they'll talk about anything else just to keep us off the subject.

Now imagine that in book form. Maybe you've read that in book form! I have to confess that I ploughed through 'Eat, Pray, Love' with a strange sense of *déjà vu*. Hadn't she already eaten that meal, said that prayer, met that Italian/Indian/Balinese guy? It's very easy when writing a book of this type to regale every incident as it actually happened, and that can become repetitive.

Furthermore, writing of this type is actually a memoir rather than a novel. The crossover line can be blurry, as James Frey discovered with his controversial book 'A Million Little Pieces' which everyone (okay, Oprah) thought was an account of his battle with drugs, and turned out to be a work of fiction.

There's nothing wrong with writing a memoir if you remember that what makes memoirs work, in addition to something vaguely interesting having happened to the author, is the quality of the writing and the ability to maintain variety. If you are a very experienced writer already and know you have the stylistic capability to carry a readership with you, then feel free to pen your memoir about overcoming alopecia, travelling around Paraguay, living as a circus trainer. It works for Bill Bryson.

For most of us, however, it would be a very daunting task to transform our experiences into a book of this kind.

But that's okay, because you want to write a novel.

The definition of a novel is generally along the lines of *an extended piece of fiction in prose where the characters' actions drive the story*. There are some key points in that brief statement. A novel is fiction. It's written in prose. There are characters. They do things. Those things make a plot.

While a memoir might contain two or three of those elements, it's not likely to cover all of those factors. Herein lies the key to my advice for those of you wanting to write using your own experiences (which I do all the time. Heck, I even borrow and occasionally

steal other people's experiences. My friends have learned to be very tight-lipped around me ...).

It's very simple.

Follow the 80/20 rule.

To me, the whole joy of fiction is being able to make stuff up. Take those real experiences, and allow them to make up 20% of your book. Then fictionalise it madly, not worrying if that's what actually happened or if it's in the same order in which it really happened. Use your factual experience as a launching pad for a broader story, with more characters, different settings, and additional 'experiences' which may never have happened to you.

Not only will you have a more interesting, satisfying, competently written novel, but you'll also have saved some of your experiences to become 20% of your next book. In the future, when you're a Pulitzer Prize winner and famed around the planet for your contributions to literature, *then* you can write your memoir.

And honestly, all the techniques you have learned here to write those brilliant novels will work every bit as well for your memoir, as you set forth with 'Diary of an Author.'

I love reading, I adore beautiful language and challenging words, and I'd love to put them all together into a dense, rich, intense novel.

Writers are often readers. They're not always, which may sound odd as you might think that one would lead naturally to the other, but I have come across many people who want to write a novel to express themselves who do not read novels. It doesn't mean they don't read, but they might prefer non-fiction. Nor does it mean that they can't write - I'm publishing a couple of authors who would fall into this category, and they've produced glorious novels.

However, I do often find that writers who are not big fiction readers are the ones who end up writing something very different to what they imagined. They set off with an idea of what a 'novel' is firmly fixed in their mind (often the darker 'literary' novel), yet find that their heart and imagination takes them in a very different direction.

So now might be a good time to discuss what those different directions are. We've just seen a rough definition of what a novel is, but we all know that one novel may include characters, prose, plot and action aplenty but can be completely different from the next novel which also includes all of those items.

I have published more children's books than adult fiction, but whenever I tell someone I write children's books, they assume that I write picture books for the under-fives. I do write those, but out of fifteen books published for adults and children, only one of them is a picture book. All the rest - three books for adults and eleven books for children - are novels, although one is very short and would probably class as a novella. Some of the children's novels are longer than the adult books. I therefore class myself, first and foremost, as a novelist - and yet even the novels I write myself differ greatly from one to the next.

What this leads us to is an understanding that there is not just 'the novel'. There are many types of novels. In fact, there is a whole spectrum of novels, and every novel along that spectrum is equally valid, is every bit as much of a novel as the books either side of it, and worthy of being as well-loved by its readership as the novel at the other end of the scale.

And what is that scale? I call it the 'Literary - Commercial' spectrum, although it could just as easily be the 'Commercial - Literary' spectrum because they are both as good as each other. There is a tendency to see literary novels as 'well-written' and commercial as 'poorly written', but I disagree with this entirely. To my mind, books are well-written if they are written properly and purposefully to meet the needs of the genre and reader.

To understand this fully, we need a better understanding of what a literary novel is, and also what constitutes a commercial novel.

Someone who wrote 'I love reading, I adore beautiful language and challenging words, and I'd love to put them all together into a dense, rich, intense novel' as in our example above would be most likely to like which kind of fiction?

Yes. Literary.

Literary fiction tends to focus on the language, setting and location, and in-depth character analysis. Commercial novels will probably be more based around the story or plot-line, with more characters who may be less-defined. Very commercial novels might be termed your 'airport blockbuster', while the very literary novel could be a complex read that requires you to think. You will probably prefer to read one over the other, and you may therefore want to write one more than the other. Generally, I find that people tend to want to write a novel along the lines of what they love to read.

Let's have a look at the two ends of the spectrum, according to various factors:

Character - how much is the novel based on the character, and how much does the character develop? Literary: One or two characters. Very defined. Slow, gentle arc
Commercial: One to four characters sharing the story. Carry the plot. Not much development

Plot - is there an obvious plotline with the story being driven along by the characters? What is the ending like? Literary: Plot may be very slight, and based around the character's insights and revelations. Ending may be sad or tragic or inconclusive, and themes overall may be about loss, despair and darker topics.
Commercial: Plot-driven, strong story with lots of action or peaks and troughs. Ending will be climatic and tie up most if not all plot strands, and will be 'happy' according to what the genre. Likely to be escapist rather than dark.

Language - what type of language is used? Do you notice the words as you go along, or do you stop to read them again (for pleasure or understanding)? Literary: Language will be considered, often beautiful, lyrical and perhaps melodic, or deliberately stark or unusual with variations in punctuation and so on. Commercial: Language will be 'everyday' language, more dialogue-based and will be easier to read at first glance. Standard layout, grammar, punctuation.

Do these novels win awards? Or do they sell large numbers of copies? Literary: Win awards, and will often be stand-alone novels. May not sell in huge numbers.
Commercial: Sell many copies, and will often be series.

Who do you think these novels are written for - a narrow audience or a broad market? Literary: Narrower audience, perhaps even targeting other authors and literary

critique; may be specific to one place, setting or theme. Commercial: Mass market, written with the reader in mind, and will probably have more universal recognition in terms of location, setting and theme.

Examples. Literary: Mr Pip, by Lloyd Jones, Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie, The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold. Commercial: Genre fiction including crime, sci-fi, fantasy, romance and chick-lit, Dan Brown books, Matthew Reilly books

Additional note - Just to note that certain books sound 'literary' eg Jane Austen novels, but would have been blockbuster commercial fiction in their time, including Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Austen.

Okay. Now we have a better understanding of what literary and commercial fiction looks like. However, it is a spectrum, remember, from literary on one end to commercial on the other. You don't need to sit *directly* at one end or the other - you might be somewhere in the middle. Or you may find you start at one end and move towards the other over time.

I like to read Nick Hornby, Kate Atkinson, Tony Parsons, David Nichols, and non-fiction like Bill Bryson: they tend to sit towards the commercial end but are not fully at that end of the spectrum. My children's and adult fiction? Exactly the same. I am definitely up at the commercial end of the spectrum, and to write my children's books I get even closer to the end of the scale as my children's books are pacy, action-driven and have very satisfying endings.

Now, if I'd shown you what I liked to read when I was a child on that spectrum, guess where it would be? Yep. So just consider your own preferences, and where you might sit on this spectrum. Draw it out, if you like - it's just a line with L on the left and C on the right.

Great! Now you're starting to be able to articulate the type of novel you're about to start writing (if you haven't already) and you will therefore have a good idea of what is may need to contain, depending on where it sits on the spectrum. We'll come back to this spectrum throughout the course, so do keep it in mind as it's a very useful gauge for various elements of novel-writing.

Incidentally, one item we didn't cover in that grid (because it's often very new to people) is the topic of wordcount. Writers, editors and publishers are obsessed by wordcount, and will usually express the length of a piece of work in terms of the number of words it contains. My recommendation is that you start counting words! Count the number of words in a chapter of your favourite novel, and then extrapolate by multiplying it by the number of chapters. That will give you a vague idea of the length of your type of book.

To give you another idea, most of my Jane Blonde novels are 55,000 to 65,000 words long. My Jack BC (formerly Doghead) novels and new series, Matilda Peppercorn, are about 70,000 words, and the wordcount for my adult fiction (nominally known as 'chick-lit') is from 60,000 to 82,000. The one that would be called a novella is only 10,000 words, though actually you'd find it very hard to get anyone to consider a novella below about 30,000 words. (My picture book is 600 words, by the way!).

In general, you won't get a book accepted much below 50,000 words which would be about the size of, say, Red Dog by Louis de Berniere, or much over 140,000 words which would be about the size of The Da Vinci Code (I'm guessing here, by the way, after years of training in estimating wordcounts from the size of the book and the font!). Aim for the middle and you won't be too far wrong in either case. There are, of course, exceptions to all of these guidelines, such as Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell, which is toward the literary end of the spectrum but is blockbuster length.

I've got a story that I think might make a good film script, but I don't know much about film/TV writing so I thought I'd write it as a novel first

Many authors write filmically. I, for one, see what's happening in the story in my mind's eye and then I write it down. I even act it out sometimes. The more drama is going on in the film in my head, the more my keyboard gets a thrashing. The letter N on my laptop has completely disappeared, which can only be as a result of me smacking the N key whenever my character screams, 'Noooooo!' So there's nothing wrong in having a story that would work either as a film script or as a novel - or as a novel that might one day be turned into a film.

However, while many of the techniques will work across the two different media, I find that authors who are predominantly screen-writers often have a strong grip on the storyline, but their characters can be rather flat (where they would be relying on the actors to flesh out the skeleton for them). At the same time, they can both overwrite and underwrite: *overwriting* much of the 'stage direction' so that the reader is told every single move and facial expression that the character makes (to make up for the actor not being there) and *underwriting* the dialogue so that it's staccato and script-like with no softening prose between lines (because the actor would add that with expression and so on). So just be aware that if you have screen-writer tendencies, these are some key areas to keep an eye on.

And finally to that last bullet point of why we might write novels - because **'Novels make more money, I've heard'**.

Well, I suppose the question in response to that would be 'than what?'

Than other forms of writing? You would probably make far more money writing non-fiction, to be honest, either through journalism or being a subject matter expert for technical books, than you'd ever make as a writer of fiction.

Than other forms of fiction? I know many quality novelists, and they nearly all have 'day jobs' or earn money from writing in some other way - non-fiction, usually. So if you're writing a novel to make your fortune, I wish you all the luck in the world, but would gently suggest that there are easier ways to do it.

So why do we do it? Why write at all?

My answer to that is ... I can't stop myself. It makes me happy. I'm never happier than a couple of hours in to a solid writing session, when I can't remember starting and I'm not dying to finish. I'm just lost in my story with my new best friends, Characters A, B and C.

Then if other people want to read it and enjoy it as much as I have, I'm extremely happy. Sometimes I get paid too, so I'm extra happy.

The happiest moment of all, though, is when a fan approaches me, freezes, and then blurts out in a rush that they loved my book and when's the next one out and could I sign their book ... That's riches indeed.

See more about this whole topic in WRITERS GOTTA WRITE!, available from www.pearjambooks.com and Amazon (for reasons you'll appreciate when you read WRITERS GOTTA WRITE!)

Here we are then. You're about to start writing your novel. You've had a think about what you like to read and perhaps established where on the 'literary-commercial' spectrum the books you read and write may sit.

My hope is that you're feeling a little less overwhelmed about the prospect of beginning your novel. It's not so intimidating. Really, it's not.

And if some of it still sounds a little scary, I promise to do whatever I can to guide you through it.

Let's go.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Get yourself a beautiful notebook, and write 'My novel' on the first page. You will need this on many occasions throughout the book, and besides, it makes you feel like a proper writer.

Turn to the next page. Draw a line across it; label one end with L for literary and the other with C for commercial. Then plot a few of your favourite books along the line in red ink. Where do they tend to fall?

Next, in green, plot the kind of book you feel you may want to write. My guess is you will find your own cross in the vicinity of your favourite books.

Thus armed, find one person you trust, and tell them in words to this effect: "I've finally done it. I'm writing a novel.'

And then, feeling just a little smug (and rightfully so) you can start to jot down all those ideas that have floated around in your head for so long in your special notebook. Suddenly, without you really thinking about it, just because you've remembered how important this always was to you and you've given yourself permission to start, your novel writing has begun. Well done.

You are a writer.

Enjoy!

Summary

The idea of writing a novel can be very daunting, but understanding what you like to read and therefore what kind of novel you may want to write helps you commit and get started.

Novels range from children's books through to adult, and from the very literary to the wholly commercial, with different emphases on character, plot and even wordcount depending on where the book sits on the literary-commercial spectrum.

We each have personal reasons for wanting to write our novel. These may affect the

type of novel we write, so it helps to identify our motive and consider the outcomes of that particular motive.

There are small, practical steps that we can take to devote our creative energies to writing, and understanding a little more about novels, as well as providing a notebook and a writing space for ourselves, can really help to focus our mind and attention, and the support of those around us.

Chapter 2: Let's begin

WHAT'S STOPPING YOU STARTING?

Knowing where to start, and making yourself do it, is often the very hardest part of the writing process. I have just struggled with it myself, wondering how to begin this chapter. Often we're just afraid to begin. After all, if you start something, you might be expected to finish it too! Committing your words to paper is not just an empty phrase, because 'committing' is exactly what you are doing. You are making yourself a promise that the story which has eaten away at your solar plexus for months, perhaps years, is going to be written down so that someone else can share it. You are opening your story up to that most frightening of creatures - a reader. Sometimes, it seems far easier not to begin at all.

Be aware that you are far from being alone if this is what you experience. Everyone has their demons, who leap up and down poking their tridents at you and forcing you back out of that chair. Walk into my house in the week I'm meant to be starting a new novel, and you will find it the cleanest it has been since ...well, since the last time I was meant to be starting a new book. I don't just clean - I spring-clean, bundle old and not-so-old items up for the charity shop, find bits of woodwork to paint. And I hate cleaning! Either that, or I find endless reasons to meet up with people for coffee. They all seem like very valid foundations for leaving my piece of work until next week. Or maybe next month.

It's rather odd that we avoid starting something that is going to bring us, and hopefully many other people, a great deal of pleasure. Writing is a joy. You find yourself in a creative space where you are unaware of the world around you. You are energized, charged up, and sometimes imbued with a strong sensation that you are channeling some greater power as part of a deeply spiritual experience. In order to get to that stage of fulfillment, however, you have to break through the starting process. If you don't find it difficult to get started, count your blessings!

Procrastination at this stage is extremely common. It's not that you're lazy, or not really that interested in writing. In writing, procrastination most often stems from a fear - the fear of being judged.

So you let yourself off the hook by pre-judging yourself with statements like “There’s no point in me starting, it’s going to be rubbish,” or “I’m far too busy to start a book; look at all the roles I have in my life, and I’m not even doing most of those properly,” and “The last time I showed my work to someone was at school, and that felt terrible - why would I put myself through that again?”

So let’s just say it. There is a tiny first step you need to take, and that’s to get over yourself a wee bit. Nobody’s looking, just sit down and do it.

Believe me, you’ll judge yourself far more harshly in the end if you don’t make yourself put pen to paper, finger to keyboard, and make a start. Then you’ll be kicking yourself, wondering why someone else is succeeding when you haven’t (answer: they wrote something), why you’re still feeling unfulfilled (answer: you’re still not doing this wonderful creative thing that you promised yourself you would do).

You need to give yourself permission to write. Here we will look into some every-day permissions - some small things you can do to allow yourself to feel free to write whenever you have planned to.

1 Zap your demons

When I’m in writing avoidance, I clean. It is about the only time that I do it willingly. After jumping up from the computer to grab the dish-cloth for the tenth time in a morning, however, I realized something.

I only clean because I have to feel that everything is in order before I can grant myself an every-day permission to write. I cannot write if the beds aren’t made, the dishwasher isn’t loaded, and there are piles of unopened mail on my desk. If my environment is cluttered, then my mind feels cluttered too.

It took me a couple of years to realize this, and I wish I’d known that about myself when I was a student many years ago!

You see, I have a Cleaning Demon. Or, more precisely, a Clutter Demon. Clutter can range from toys and DVDs on the floor, to unopened e-mails. Whatever the case, I have to zap my demon before I am happy to write.

My routine has changed completely to accommodate this. My writing routine used to be practically non-existent, other than I would get myself up and my daughter to school before considering what to do with the day. I would therefore waste hours and sometimes whole days catching up with all the tidying, before remembering with a shock that I had to be back at the school gate.

Nowadays I still come to with a jolt when it's close to home-time, but that is because I am engrossed in my writing, sometimes so engrossed that I forget to eat. If I have a writing project in mind, I get up a little earlier, tidy everything away, deal with my emails, and *then* sort my daughter out and walk the dog (another demon of mine - the Sorrowful Canine Demon). If there's enough spare cash I get cleaners in to do a thorough clean once a week or fortnight too.

Then at 9.30am, I'm ready to sit down and start writing, in the knowledge that the demonic twins of Dog and Dirt will not be able to goad me into writing avoidance. That allows me a few straight hours of uninterrupted writing time, so I can switch off without guilt when I turn back into a parent and dog-walker.

Once you've identified your demons, it's much easier to zap them. You could write a SMART goal for this (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-related). For instance, my own might have been: "I will get up half-an-hour early on writing days and make sure all surfaces are cleared and all mail is dealt with by 8.45am."

2 Gag the nag

The nag is your internal critic, not to be confused with a demon, for all he or she may have many similar characteristics. They both fill your head with insidious black little thoughts that block your creativity. Both will jostle for position with all the other thoughts in your head, trying to gain supremacy. The most obvious and important similarity between the demon and the nag is that both will stop you writing.

Unlike your demons, however, there will be times when your internal critic will be useful. When you are editing, you will find Inner Critic invaluable. When you are half-way through your piece and a little nagging voice is telling you that you have headed off tangentially in completely the wrong direction, it may be worth listening then too. Right now, though, you are just about to start, and that is not the time let the nagging voice

disarm you.

Some practical things you might do that will enable you to gag the nag:

Switch off the spelling and grammar check on your computer. You may need help in this area, in which case you can switch it on again when you're done. If you don't need help in this area, there's no point in having it on anyway. In either case, there is nothing more guaranteed to stop you in your tracks than a squiggly red or green line appearing under your writing as the words pop up on the screen. 'Well, what's wrong with that?' you think. Then what's even worse is that an annoying little figure pops up with a speech box and tells you exactly what's wrong with that. Usually it's a 'fragmented sentence' which you should 'consider rewording'. No, you shouldn't. Feel free to shout at the annoying little figure as you switch him off: 'I'm writing a novel, you annoying little man! Fragmented sentences are allowed!'

Promise yourself you will write solidly for two paragraphs, or a page, or a chapter - whatever you can sensibly manage - without once checking over what you've written. Your internal editor will make you question every word if you check every sentence, whereas if you go back at the end of a good stretch of writing you'll question fewer of the details and look at it more as a whole. This means you'll achieve more, feel good about it, and eventually realise that you can turn off your editor almost completely until you're good and ready to turn them back on again.

Find yourself some music to listen to while you're writing. You won't exactly *listen* - you'll just let it fade into the background while your lovely book pours out onto the page. But meanwhile the part of your brain that needs noise will have something to focus on, and there's less chance of that nagging voice shouting 'Me, me! Listen to me!' Particularly if you find some music it loves and send it to sleep.

There may be something else you know of that will help you gag that nag. You may find that you actually recognise the voice of the nag, and need to do some work on clearing that out. I've been amazed to discover how many writers experience the depressive dip before they begin writing, and often what they're listening to is that voice, telling them there's no way they should give up the life they've established to even try to write.

Deep down, in its own strange way, the voice is trying to help you by protecting you. In

the end, however, it can stop you in your tracks. Name it, face it, and lay it to rest. You'll be very glad in the end.

Be the teacher

Another way to make yourself get your book underway is to pretend that you're your own teacher. This is a strict teacher. Teacher wants your homework in on time. Teacher expects you to have written two full pages by the end of your lunch-hour. Teacher doesn't care what else you've got to do: TEACHER HAS SPOKEN!

Okay, you don't need to frighten yourself with memories of your most horrible teacher ever, but what you do need to do is set yourself a deadline. Then stick to it. Make the deadline practical (SMART, in fact) and then find a way to make yourself commit to it and follow it through.

If you were doing this course in a workshop situation instead of online, I would be doing this for you in person. It's called 'We're going to do an exercise'. I'd set the exercise, which might sneakily involve you starting your book, and tell you how long you've got to do it. At the end of that allotted time, I would stop you.

Even if you hadn't wanted to write a word, just the feeling that I would be expecting something from you would spur you on (not to mention the pressure of everyone else in the room apparently beavering away without a moment's hesitation). So what you're doing, effectively, is turning yourself into me. You are your own Jill Marshall Avatar.

The other part of being a teacher, of course, is giving feedback and coaching. So while you're being your own teacher, complete your piece of writing to deadline and *then* allow yourself some time to read it, mark it, and think what you might say to yourself as your teacher. That way you can write, edit, and improve in blocks as you go along, and you're actually moving your book forward in leaps and bounds.

4 Incentivise

This is straight-forward one. Just promise yourself a reward for when you've made a really good start. As long as it's not a month off writing, or tracking down Jill Marshall and shooting her for making you do this, you can have complete free range as to how to motivate yourself to get to a finish point.

CREATING IDEAS

Funnily enough, what we've actually been doing with the above exercise might be classed as yet more procrastination, as you still haven't started writing your story! Sorry about that. I just thought it was important to discuss. So now you're ready, and ... off you go!

Oh, all right, you can leave it a moment. It's not just as straightforward as getting your office sorted and setting yourself a deadline. You have to have something to write *about*.

Now, you may already have your idea in mind. That might be why you signed up for this course, in fact. In which case, that's great. It's very likely that your idea will have come from something you experienced - saw, overheard, did yourself, went through as a child or with your own kids. Good, because that's pretty much where all our ideas come from (although it's important to remember the 80/20 rule and try not to report *everything* you've experienced in strict chronological order).

If you don't already have a steady flow of ideas, however, I'm going to introduce you to the way I generate every single one of my ideas for books short or long, old or young, simple or complex. It's a construct you hear of a lot in the film world, with many film premises and pitches starting with these very words. Just two little words that spark of stories worldwide, for time immemorial:

WHAT IF?

That's it. What if. From those two tiny words have sprung every single one of my books, and other authors' books world-wide. Here's how it works: you observe something ordinary, and then you ask yourself, 'What if that wasn't ordinary? What if it wasn't what I'm seeing/hearing/smelling/sensing at all? What if it was completely different to expectations?'

For my Jane Blonde novels, the process started with me calling my daughter 'Blonde girl' and 'Blondie' when she was about two years old (a long time ago now!). I connected the name 'Blonde' with a certain special agent, and started to think, 'What if

there was a girl called Blonde. She'd have to have a first name that sounded like James. Jane. Yeah. So what if there was a girl called Jane Blonde? She'd just have to be a spy.'

And so Jane Blonde was born. That was in 1998. That character sat around in my head for three or four years until I was well into my Masters' Degree in Writing for Children, because while I could see that she had enormous potential as a character, I didn't actually have that other critical element of a good story - a plot.

Then one day, I was watching a programme on TV about extreme animals who can live in extraordinarily harsh or challenging environments. On his hand, the presenter was holding out a glassy object, and he was explaining that it was actually a frog - a North American Wood Frog, in fact. To survive in the frozen Canadian snowscape, the frog stops all its bodily processes including breathing and circulating blood, and effectively freezes itself. If someone dug it out of the ground and threw it into the fireplace like a vodka glass, it would smash into a thousand shards. But if they warmed it gently in front of the fire instead, replicating a spring thaw, the frog would start to pump its blood around again, breathe again ... come back to life again.

Amazing, I thought, and I experienced this funny quiver in my body which usually means I've hit on a good idea.

'What if,' I asked myself, 'instead of being a freezing frog, there was some way to find a way for people to do that? What if a person could freeze solid for a time and then come back to life?' Then I remembered cryogenics, which is the science investigating just this very ability. That had already been done. I had to be wilder in my imagining.

'Okay, okay,' I said. 'So what if once they're frozen, the person can be shaped into something else - a creature, or ice cubes, or icicles or what if ...' The possibilities were endless. 'And then what if while they were frozen, they could listen in on conversations and so on, then they'd have their cells marked so they could be put back together again ... and what if ... what if that person was a spy! How useful that would be for spying!'

And there it was. My plot. My story to go with the girl spy I'd created some four years before. I wrote the first Jane Blonde quickly, and then what ifted my way through a series of seven books, while having many other 'what if' moments throughout that have formed other books.

The other amazing thing about this process is that one ‘what if’ can spawn many different ideas. Someone else might have looked at that frog and thought, ‘What if it came to life now and swallowed the presenter?’ Or, ‘What if the presenter tried to demonstrate the smashing thing, dropped the frog, and it bounced? What if it’s actually the bounciest frog ever? And what if it’s discovered by NASA, and what if it can be used for investigating what’s happening on Mars just by bouncing?’

Well, perhaps they might not have had those very thoughts. Those are my other thoughts. I do have a very potent imagination, but then it’s now been trained in a million ‘what if’ moments, so that hardly a day goes by when I don’t have a new idea for a book, or a chapter, or what to do with a tricky bit of something I’m writing. It makes me very nosy so I might lean in a bit too close to some stranger’s conversation, and sometimes I go into a trance while I’m what iffing and the person who gave me the idea thinks I’m staring at them for no good reason. But other than that, generally I find it an incredibly useful process.

Notice as well, as with the Jane Blonde frog idea and the bouncing space investigator idea, I didn’t just stop at one ‘what if’. I keep on what iffing, extrapolating the silly scenario until I’ve sometimes generated the plan for a whole book in minutes. So the process is ‘What if this’ followed by ‘then what if it ... and then what if they ... and then what if the thing and the people do ...’ And so it goes on.

To fictionalize your facts, you could use the ‘what iffing’ process in the same way. Let’s say that, as a child, you were unwittingly involved in some shoplifting. I don’t know how; I’ll leave you to figure out the details.

In your memory banks will be an exact image of what really happened. Now, try imagining what might have happened if it didn’t go exactly like that. Your friend stole a hair slide. What if they were a boy instead of a girl? They got caught. What if they didn’t, but handed you the hair slide instead? Your friend had to pay up out of her pocket and you were both sent off with a flea in your ear. What if your friend ran, instead? What if the hair slide was a present for a dying grandmother? What if it was a special hair slide that she had owned as a child?

You see how it goes. From 20% of a true story grows 80% of a fictional story. Someone

who knows you very well may recognise the core of the incident; everyone else is just going to love the idea of Billy going against the odds to procure something unique and special for his beloved grandmother.

To give you an example, my adult novel 'The Two Miss Parsons' is about a woman who travels with her daughter from England to New Zealand, and has several adventures along the way. Often people who know me will look at the blurb, or study the cover with quizzical eyebrows, and then say, 'Is that you?'

Well, yes, to an extent it is me. I am a woman who travelled with my daughter from England to New Zealand. Yes, we did have some adventures along the way. And yes, they are in the book.

Guess how much?

Yip. 20%.

Those pieces are the ones that add detail and richness to your novel, but they're not necessarily the ones that add drama and intrigue or pathos or whatever emotion it is you want your reader to experience.

The blurb from the back of The Two Miss Parsons says:

For new redundant Cally Parsons - Cal the Career Gal and single parent - it seems like the perfect time to postpone real life and start that search for her inner artist. But daughter Paige has other ideas. A little search of her own.

For her father.

Trouble is: he's on the other side of the planet, in New Zealand, and they haven't seen him in years.

Will he want them? Will they want him? Will Cal cope with the thrill of an unexpected and mysterious love interest? Because let's face it - it's going to take a special kind of guy to take on the The Two Miss Parsons.

I will now highlight for you the parts of that blurb that are true to life.

For new redundant Cally Parsons - Cal the Career Gal and single parent - it seems like the perfect time to postpone real life and start that search for her inner artist. But daughter Paige has other ideas. A little search of her own.

For her father.

Trouble is: he's on the other side of the planet, in New Zealand, and they haven't seen him in years.

Will he want them? Will they want him? Will Cal cope with the thrill of an unexpected and mysterious love interest? Because let's face it - it's going to take a special kind of guy to take on the The Two Miss Parsons

So you see? Very little of it actually happened to me! My life is far less interesting than Cally and Paige's lives, and that's the point of making up 80% of it. I had already travelled across the world with my daughter, on my own, post-redundancy, and wanted to write about some of those experiences. I soon realised, however, that those experiences on their own would not make a good read, apart from those people who had an interest in what I'd got up to on my holidays. Much as I love them, I didn't feel eight or nine friends and six members of my family would make up a big enough market.

That's when I learned my 80/20 lesson. I asked myself, 'What if that wasn't exactly what happened?' What if, for instance, a young girl wanted to find out more about her father? What if she creates a situation where the mother can't get out of it? But what if, in fact, it wasn't the young girl's idea in the first place? Whose idea could it have been? And why?

Suddenly the plot became much more layered and complex, with complications intrinsically entwined into the layers: what if the mother doesn't want to go? What if she falls in love with the girl's father again but he's married, or gay, or dead? What if ... what if ... what ...

You'll notice, too, the other thing that happens when you apply this process to your 'actual' incident or experience - the character has become 'the mother' and eventually

becomes 'Cally'. The young girl is 'the daughter' and eventually 'Paige'. They stopped being me and my daughter, although our natures and adventures are obviously caught up in there somewhere. The book became *theirs*, not mine.

(Just as an aside, we've discovered that people apply their own 'what ifs' to real life anyway if you don't fill in the gaps for them. This is fun. According to many sources who have reported it in a round-robin that eventually got back to us, my daughter and I moved to New Zealand from *Scotland* after I was *widowed* and could no longer stand the *pain of trying to live in the place* where my poor husband's shadow walked before me. Couldn't be further from the truth - never lived in Scotland, never been married, never been anguished by a place! - but I quite like it anyway. What if ...)

What iffing is fabulous fun. You can also do with newspaper headlines and articles, things you overhear, something your kids bring home from school, a billboard or noticeboard. Look around you now, find your own example and What If with it. You'll become obsessed - or cursed.

Anyway, cursed or blessed, hopefully you'll generate heaps of ideas, and if you know of any other ways to create ideas then go with the flow - it might be walking in nature, or staring into a candle, or staring at the clouds.

Once you've accumulated a stock of ideas, you'll start to recognise that some of them are better than others, or are more sustainable, or will just allow you to complete a story without hitting a brick wall in the middle. You'll note from my own frog example that the 'swallows presenter' story wasn't really going anywhere, and I didn't know how that would end. The bouncing frog had more traction, and could have gone somewhere (and still might one day!), but the spy story had sprung forth in more or less complete form.

This is what often happens: the ideas with legs will just pour out and feel whole in some way. You might remember that funny 'quiver' I feel when I know a story's good - well, that's something else to begin to recognise. It's not a coincidence that publishers will say they knew they had a great book on their hands when the hairs all stood up on the back of their neck, or they got goose-pimples up their arms, or they shivered. Great ideas cause physical reactions.

I feel it in my solar plexus, right in my core - a burst of heat and light that creates that shudder. Or I find I can't stop smiling while I'm reading. This happens particularly when I'm reading a manuscript that I'm thinking of publishing. As a finish, I punch the air and congratulate the author aloud.

You'll find a way to trust your instincts, and discover which ideas warrant further investigation and which should be shelved (though you might bring them back out again one day).

Okay. You've got an idea, and you've done a very rough plan for some it. Now for the story itself. Either in your notebook or on exercise paper or on your computer, start your story. On your marks, get set ... GO!

It's fine. I'll wait. Come back when you've written a page or two.

Back again?

Well, now that you've done your writing exercise, we're going to be Nice Teacher instead of Strict Teacher, and review, comment and improve. Hopefully it was quite easy to get started once you'd settled yourself down to the task. Good.

What I wanted for you to do was connect with the story and a character or two, at least a little, and give vent to the ideas that were starting to form in your imagination. Now, though, we're going to look at where your story itself should start ... and it's not always at the beginning that you devised.

If you bear in mind that the most frequent advice to authors from their editors is to lose the first chapter, you might get some inkling of what I mean. It's very common when you begin writing to start your story with some description of the setting, perhaps a list of characteristics of your hero or heroine, and some back-story of what's been going on with your characters to bring them to this point.

This is the beginning of the classic children's novel 'Black Beauty'.

The first place that I can remember was a large pleasant meadow with a pond of clear water in it. Some shady trees leaned over it, and rushes and water-lilies grew at the deep end. Over the hedge on one side we looked into a ploughed field, and on the

other we looked over a gate at our master's house, which stood by the roadside; at the top of the meadow was a plantation of fir trees, and at the bottom a running brook overhung by a steep bank.

While I was young I lived upon my mother's milk, as I could not eat grass. In the day time I ran by her side, and at night I lay down close by her. When it was hot, we used to stand by the pond in the shade of the trees ...

And so it goes on for several paragraphs if not pages. Of course, that's the style for the age, as it was written in the late 1800s. However, contrast that with the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* which was written several decades earlier.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

'My dear Mr Bennet,' said his lady to him one day, 'have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?'

Mr Bennet replied that he had not.

'But it is,' returned she; 'for Mrs Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.'

Mr Bennet made no answer.

'Do you not want to know who has taken it?' cried his wife impatiently.

'You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.'

This was invitation enough.

This seems so much more informative than the *Black Beauty* piece, even though it's shorter. We have an instant introduction to an era, a place, social norms of the day, and two wonderful characters, so cleverly depicted that we know a huge amount about their personalities just from what they say without it being described in detail.

Of course, *Pride and Prejudice* is not a *children's* classic, so if you'd like to compare it with a contemporary novel that is fast becoming a children's classic (or at least, the film of the book has been made, which seems to make it just as important!), take a look at the beginning of *'How to Train Your Dragon'* by Cressida Cowell:

Long ago, on the wild and windy isle of Berk, a smallish Viking with a longish name stood up to his ankles in snow.

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, the Hope and Heir to the Tribe of the Hairy Hooligans, had been feeling slightly sick ever since he woke up that morning.

Ten boys, including Hiccup, were hoping to become full members of the Tribe by passing the Dragon Initiation Programme. They were standing on a bleak little beach at the bleakest spot on the whole bleak island. A heavy snow was falling.

'PAY ATTENTION!' screamed Gobber the Belch, the soldier in charge of teaching Initiation ...

What differences do you see? Both *Black Beauty* and *How to Train Your Dragon* describe a setting - a field and the isle of Berk respectively. They both explain something about the main character. They both use evocative language that is right for their readers (if you consider that *Black Beauty* was published in 1877). Obviously there are differences in tone and so on, and there is dialogue in the Hiccup tale while there isn't in *Black Beauty*, but the main difference to my mind is that in 'How to Train Your Dragon', *something is happening*. It's the same in *Pride and Prejudice*. We have been brought straight into an event, in this case an exciting and scary initiation ceremony that introduces us quickly and cleverly to the nervous (and wonderfully-named) Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third.

Just to drive the point home, this is the beginning of my favourite adult novel of all time (so far, as I am naturally going to be persuaded to change my mind by one or your novels): *HOW TO BE GOOD*, by Nick Hornby.

I am in a car park in Leeds when I tell my husband I don't want to be married to him any more. David isn't even in the car park with me. He's at home, looking after the kids, and I have only called him to remind him that he should write a note for Molly's class teacher. The other bit just sort of ... slips out.

Something happening. Something unusual happening that affects the usual routine of life. There's no scene-setting, apart from mentioning a car park in Leeds. There's nothing outrageous happening - she's making a phone call about the kids.

But see how it drives us straight into the novel. What's she doing there? Why is she in Leeds? What kind of monster tells their husband that over the phone? What's been going on - and even more importantly, what's going to happen now?

That, then, is the key to the beginning of novel. Open with 'something happening' that hooks the reader in right from the outset. This is particularly critical in children's novels as children are the most exacting of readers; if you haven't grabbed them by the end of the first page, that book is going back down on the pile. They're far less forgiving than adult readers who might let you ramble on for a chapter before deciding to give up on you.

Whichever audience you are writing for, and regardless of which end of the literary-commercial spectrum you are sitting at, it's our job as authors to create atmosphere and setting and character without spelling it out, and by having the reader leap straight into the story with you.

Do note that the action doesn't have to be the main catalyst for the rest of the book. These beginnings all establish character, setting, atmosphere with some action that is not the principal catalyst (or the 'bomb' as it's sometimes known). Here are some of my favourite beginnings of novels - apart from *Pride and Prejudice*, which you've already seen:

Bumface, by Morris Gleitzman

'Angus Solomon,' sighed Ms Lowry. 'Is that a penis you've drawn in your exercise book?'

Angus jumped, startled, and remembered where he was.

Ms Lowry was standing next to his desk, staring down at the page. Other kids were sniggering.

Angus felt his mouth go dry and his heart speed up. For a second, he thought about lying. He decided not to.

'No, Miss,' he admitted, 'it's a submarine.'

Ms Lowry nodded grimly. 'I thought as much,' she said. 'Now stop wasting time and draw a penis like I asked you to.' She pointed to the one she'd drawn on the blackboard.

Now, what reader isn't going to want to dive into a story with a beginning like that?

Bill's New Frock, by Anne Fine

When Bill Simpson woke up on Monday morning, he found he was a girl.

He was still standing staring at himself in the mirror, quite baffled, when his mother swept in.

'Why don't you wear this pretty pink dress?' she said.

'I never wear dresses,' Bill burst out.

'I know,' his mother said. 'It's such a pity.'

So you see, all we need to discover what's going on with Bill is that first line. There's no explanation. No background. No setting or character description. None of it is necessary - we know that Bill is in his bedroom, and when he went to bed on Sunday night, he was your average boy. And suddenly, on Monday morning (just in time for school) he's woken up as a girl. Straight in at a piece of action, and in this case the piece of action is the catalyst for the whole of the rest of the book - in which, incidentally, it is never explained why he turned into a girl overnight!

The Pleasure of My Company, by Steve Martin

This all started because of a clerical error.

Without the clerical error, I wouldn't have been thinking this way at all; I wouldn't have had time. I would have been too pre-occupied with the new friends I was planning to make at Mensa, the international society of geniuses. I'd taken their IQ test, by my score came back missing a digit. Where was the 1 that should have been in front of the 90? I fell short of genius category by a full fifty points, barely enough to qualify me to sharpen their pencils. Thus I was rejected from membership and facing a hopeless pile of red tape to correct the mistake.

This is my second favourite adult novel of all time, published in 2003. This opening always gave me such a clear impression of the character and what exasperation and bewilderment this Mensa cock-up would have caused them.

Now when I read it, I picture Sheldon from 'Big Bang Theory'. That's okay. I'm sure Steve Martin would approve.

What all these authors have done is hook the reader in from the first few words. There's very little scene setting or character description or back-story (which is what tends to go into those first chapters that the editor instructs us to remove!).

Instead something unusual has happened. Not necessarily unusual overall - it's not aliens falling out of the sky or volcanoes erupting - but it's an unusual or significant event for the characters.

It's an interruption to the routine of their everyday lives. Furthermore, we don't need to have seen a complete run-down of the minutiae of their everyday lives *before* the interruption. We infer the routine from the interruption.

So now it's time to look back at the beginning of the story you just wrote. Do you spend time describing all sorts of background information? If so, you could follow that editorial advice and lose the equivalent of your first chapter, which might be a few lines in this case.

Do you jump into a piece of action? If not, you might think now about how your 'what if' could lead to a little incident or event which drops the reader right into the story.

It doesn't have to be THE incident that sparks off the rest of the book, but it does have to be interesting, atmospheric, and immerse your reader immediately in your character and their setting. It should introduce some interruption to their usual routine.

The interruption is what your novel's about - a chunk of their lives lifted out of the dust of ordinary daily details, whether that's cleaning at the supermarket each morning at 5am, or living in a cupboard under the stairs.

So now we're at the end of chapter 2. You've begun to begin.

Next, we're going to move on from these opening pages of your book to go through the middle of it and find a way to get to the end. If you feel that now you've started, you'd like to carry on, then keep gag the nag, zap your demons, and keep writing!

SOMETHING TO TRY

Rewrite the beginning of your story, making sure it's snappy.

Then read both versions aloud, and see how they grab you.

With luck, you'll get at least a glimmer of that physical reaction which proves to us that we're on the right track.

SUMMARY

Getting started is often pretty difficult. Work out what issues might be holding you back, and give yourself some tools for tackling them.

You can gather ideas for stories from anywhere, but a great way to see new stories everywhere is to use the 'What If?' technique to take something ordinary, and imagine how it could be if it was not ordinary at all.

Beginnings of contemporary books are inviting, and grab the reader right from the outset. If you jump in with a piece of action, you'll be able to expose the setting, atmosphere and character without having to write it out for the reader.

'Action' at the beginning of the book does not have to be the main catalytic piece of action that informs the whole of the rest of the story, although at times it may be exactly that!

The beginning of your novel is the interruption to the usual routine in that character's life, and then the novel overall is about how that interruption changes their life from this moment on.

Chapter 3 To plot, or not to plot

So now you've started your new book, and applied a little light editing to it so that it drags the reader into the story right from the outset. Your beginning glimmers with unsolved mystery while giving your fans a taste of character and setting and the many treasures to come. Even as the writer, you're excited to discover the rest of this wondrous tale. What's going to happen? Where will it go? How will this intriguing question set out in the first few paragraphs ever get answered?

It's quite an amazing aspect of creative writing - the fact that at this stage, we're often as much in the dark as the reader. Who knows where it's going? Am I supposed to?

Really, it's up to you. You'll have a certain style, a particular way of writing that influences whether it unfolds for you in the same way as it would for the reader, or whether you're three steps ahead of them, or 32 chapters in front. From chapters 1 and 2, you will have begun to discern what kind of writer you are and what kind of novel you are planning to write, so you might already have a few clues as to which category you fall into.

It's an exciting point, to be sitting on the crest of your story with the landscape about to unroll before you. It can also, however, be incredibly daunting. There may be dense fog obscuring your path. There may be patchy sunlight which you know you ought to be heading for but which appears to be reachable only by traversing bogs and gorse thickets.

Writers will often tell me that this is the stage at which they get stuck, put off by the enormity of what lies ahead.

Younger writers particularly seem to expend all their energy in getting the first few pages written, and then run out of steam so that they never embark on the rest of the journey. This is often where you'll find a rushed ending such as 'and then they woke up and it had all been a dream' or - particularly among the nine and ten-year-old boy contingent - 'then the world blew up and EVERYBODY DIED!' It's quite an obsession for this age group, but I do believe that many adult writers would like to be able to have everybody just die. Then there would be no need to map out the rest of the story; no need to consider how a character is going to develop; no need to do anything more,

really, but wrap that story up, put it away, and find a new idea to work on.

Alternatively, you might decide that this *has* to go somewhere - it's too good for it to be put away! - and so you'll diligently sit down and make yourself write. That's good.

That's better. That's definitely the thing to do. Some people find that they can *only* write this way - that it somehow stifles the creative impulse if you attempt to foresee what's going to happen, or plan how it will occur. As one author told me recently: "I write as far ahead as I can see in the headlights."

What that can often lead to, however, is a middle that sags and loses pace and interest (which we know in the trade as a 'doughnut' with a soggy middle), and/or an ending which disappoints the reader because it doesn't answer that question that you cleverly postulated in your snappy beginning.

So how can you keep up the pace, drive through that squelchy landscape in the middle section, and ensure that you snare that reader interest right to the very last word?

The choice will be down to you and your preferred style of writing. Do bear in mind, however, that this may well change as your writing career progresses - it certainly has for me.

In fact, I've discovered that this is an ever evolving process, and just as your life priorities will change over the coming years as you continue writing your novels, so, too, will your creative process. So this is really an exercise in finding out what suits you *right now*. By dealing with *right now* you're going to allow yourself to get into your novel. If that has to change in the future, well, that's fine. It will be a different 'right now' by then.

Here is what I have discovered during my various 'right now' approaches to writing.

PLANNING VERSUS EDITING

The main learning point for me over the years has been that what you don't do up-front at the planning stage, you pay for at the end in the editing. For instance:

Jane Blonde 1, Sensational Spylet

I didn't plan this at all, and it all came out very fast in a magnificent roller-coaster ride which took me about three weeks and was absolutely exhilarating. I knew that it was good (that shiver that we talked about earlier) and indeed, it did find me an agent and a publisher pretty quickly.

However, my very wise editor wrote me a ten page report on all the various plot strands I'd written that weren't going anywhere, how I hadn't followed through on certain questions, how there were pieces missing that would make absolute sense of certain challenges, and where I also ought to capitalise on my own style (which I would often see as 'More like this, please!' in the margin). I didn't have to re-write the whole book, but I had to spend a great deal of time sorting all these issues out and sending it back and forth to my editor three or four times. The version that was eventually published had probably been more or less re-written half-a-dozen times. **So 10% planning, 90% editing.**

Jane Blonde 2, Spies Trouble

I hadn't been expected to be asked to write a second Jane Blonde novel, so I really had no idea what I was going to write about, and was somewhat nervous about it. My agent at the time tried to put me at ease with these wise words: "Oh, don't worry - everybody expects your second book to be rubbish." Those may not be exactly the words she used, but the sense was that authors are expected to peak with their first book, and then like rock bands moving on to that difficult second album, they're expected to struggle with the second. Of course, then I *expected* to struggle with the second, and therefore, perversely, I relaxed. Ah, so everyone finds this hard, I thought. Might as well get on and just try to enjoy it.

Letting myself off the hook, I looked back at the first Jane Blonde to figure out a way forward for the second. I recognised that the idea that had worked well in Sensational Spylet - the frozen frog from chapter 2 - was a theme that should perhaps be carried on into any further Jane Blondes. And yes, of course, by now I had my sights set on MORE Jane Blondes even though I hadn't been contracted for more than two at that stage.

The frozen frog was an animal, so I decided to make each of the Jane Blonde™ books feature something special about an animal. Janey's own special animal was her cat, Trouble, and from that unfolded the idea for my second Blonde book. What if Trouble had nine lives as all cats are meant to, and what if someone discovered the secret of how to create nine lives for themselves ... and what if that person was the enemy spy? They would be more or less immortal! So the story became about Trouble being used in experiments, and the Enemy Spy revealing themselves to Janey who has to transform into Jane Blonde to thwart them.

All well and good. This time, at least, I had a vague idea of the overall storyline, and so I set to with a vengeance, plunging Trouble into all sorts of catastrophes (pardon the

pun) and leaving Janey/Jane to work everything out. At the same time, I hadn't quite worked out who the Enemy Spy was going to be so I let them play out their own role for me, and what transpired was a miserable character called Joy. I called her Badly-Named Joy and thoroughly amused myself with her, making her increasingly sardonic and then sinister. I finished the book and whacked it away to my editor. Done and dusted, thank you very much.

Unfortunately (or fortunately in the end) my editor didn't agree. Badly-Named Joy wasn't really working for her, and when she pointed out the many instances where Joy was less than joyful to the reader, I could see exactly what she meant.

Furthermore, Joy didn't really fit the bill of the first Enemy Spy I'd come up with in the first Blonde book, and that version had far more long-term appeal than Joy. And there were a few things in the plot that weren't stacking up or I hadn't rounded off properly, largely because I was trying to be clever and leave a few cliff-hangers to persuade the publisher that they just had to get me to write Jane Blonde 3 ... and 4 ... and however many we could agree on ... This is a no-no, and I now ensure that every single book in a series stands on its own while also feeding into the overall series storyline.

This time I had to do a substantial re-write, taking out Badly-Named Joy (or Badly-Written Joy as she turned out to be) and fitting a new plot strand and proper, complete ending around a completely different character. The right character. The one who should have been there in the first place. So this time, **25% planning, 75% editing.**

Jane Blonde 3, Twice the Spylet

By now I had a very good idea of what I was doing with the overall series. Special animal ... special animal ...

This time I chose a sheep - a REALLY special sheep who in real life (if that's what we can call it) is called Dolly. And where do they have lots of sheep? Australia. Already I had a setting (Oz - in fact a sheep farm called Dubbo Seven, just to amuse myself again). I had a challenge that would inform the plot in the way Dolly was created, an Enemy Spy from books one and two, and a cast of supporting characters who were really starting to grow and attract a fan-base because of their various characteristics and how they related to Janey/Jane.

In addition, I had the experience of my last two books to draw upon. This time I did not stare into space for a few moments with a beatific smile on my face, then plunge myself into a month of furious, plot-less writing.

This time I planned it.

Not word for word, and not so that I wouldn't have the opportunity to follow a creative thread if the urge overtook me, but certainly with five or six pages of notes about what was going to happen throughout the whole book: how it would start, where it would go, what kind of mad inventions I would have to create for Janey to get to Australia, what the characters would be up to, what the climax would be, and how it would end altogether (properly, and not waiting for the publisher to buy Book 4).

Then, and only then, did I set about writing. And what I discovered about the creative process, having done this very UNcreative thing of planning my book in a reasonably clinical fashion, was absolutely fascinating.

Because I knew where I was going, I could enjoy the journey.

Because I wasn't scratching my head waiting for a character to tell me what to say next on their behalf, I had an absolute ball going to town with each and every one of them.

Because I knew how it was going to end, I could make that ending and the show-down that led to it as spectacular a climax as I'd seen in any children's book, and the quality of my writing and ability to get that down on the page actually improved.

Planning did not make me less creative. It made me *more* creative.

I had a fantastic time writing that book. It's still one of my favourites in the Jane Blonde series, in part because I remember what a joy it was to write, and in part because I was free to go overboard with the idiosyncrasies of each character precisely because I knew what I was doing with them.

And the feedback from my editor? She was delighted. Yes, there was still editing to do - additions or subtractions that she could see that I hadn't identified - but all in all the editing process was much shorter, and very much easier. So this time it was about 75% planning, 25% editing.

Of course, I'd like to suggest that I now plan 100% of the time and have zero editing to do, but I'm still an unpredictable creative when it comes down to it. Sometimes I do just have to follow a flight of imagination to see where it goes. I usually regret it, but not always, so I like to leave an element of flexibility in my planning process so that my creative self can take over if the need arises. Nowadays, the ratio of planning to editing is probably 85% to 15%, or maybe 80/20. That 80/20 rule applies just about everywhere!

A note about series: in the end, the complete Jane Blonde™ series comprised seven books. I'd set out to write one, several years back, and didn't know that it would carry on to even one more book, let alone six others. By the time I got to book seven (which we'd agreed would be the last because it felt like the right length, and also because the number seven has special significance for spies ... Dubbo Seven again or 007 for purists) I was planning up a storm. Each of the last few books had been well-planned, and I'd also started to point each of them at the overall ending for the series which I'd had in mind from JB 3, Twice the Spylet.

However, in the seventh book, Spylets are Forever, I had to tie together all the plot-strands that had gone on through the whole series when I hadn't planned them in the first place. This was certainly a challenge, but also one of those incredibly, channelling moments that you'll have from time to time while writing your novels. I would suddenly realise that I'd put something in the first book completely unconsciously, because eventually it would lead to this point in the seventh book. Which I'd had no idea I was going to write.

So who did know, back in 2003 when I was writing Sensational Spylet, that one day in six years' time I would need this particular niblet of information to tie up the seventh book? I don't know the answer to that. But sometimes we get these little messages and reminders that we are not doing this on our own. It's really rather wonderful.

Having said that, it's probably the not the greatest idea to wait for and expect divine intervention to allow you to complete your series satisfactorily. When I set about organising my next series, starring Matilda Peppercorn, I let the series form as a whole in my mind first. Well, I say 'let.' Again, someone or something else was involved because the entire story popped into my head as a complete storyline with nine component parts. I've planned the overall concept and each book very carefully, and I am thoroughly, utterly enjoying writing them because I know where they're going, and I am sure the readers are going to enjoy coming on this journey with me.

I should add, however, that even that planning has changed. I have a new 'right now'. Back when I first formulated the idea for Matilda Peppercorn, I was envisaging a series entitled 'The Nine Lives of Matilda Peppercorn'. Not surprisingly, this comprised a total of nine books, each named after a different breed of cat. I wrote the first one, entitled The Nine Lives of Matilda Peppercorn: Manx, and then confidently sat back, waiting for my publisher to coo and issue a contract for nine books within seconds.

Well, they loved the book and certainly cooed over it. Apart from that, nothing went

according to my expectations. We didn't agree on the title of the series. We didn't agree on the name of my heroine. We then began to disagree about what the content of the story should be. We certainly did not agree that there should be nine books in the series, so my entire series plan went out the window. After a lot of disagreeing, we agreed to disagree and the publisher decided not to publish the book at all, so I was free to do what I wanted with it.

First of all, I published it through my own publishing company, Pear Jam Books, in a shape and size pretty close to what I had first submitted to the publisher, and with the anticipation that I'd write and publish the other eight. Then time passed, and my 'right now' changed. I suddenly felt that I didn't want to stick to my original plan. I didn't want nine books, each named after a cat. I wanted three books, each named after something significant in Matilda Peppercorn's life. The plot hasn't changed, but it has been condensed. The first book hasn't altered massively - hardly at all, in fact - but now that it's the first in a trilogy, it feels different, somehow. Even better than the book with which I was so delighted. Because now the plan feels right. I've just re-released that book as *Matilda Peppercorn, Switch*, and the next two will follow in due course: *MP, Felidae* and *MP, Guardian*. Amazing what the passage of time can do to your connection with a book, or a series of books. Amazing, really, what 'right now' can entail ...

Oh, I'll tell you this, too, just because I get asked it a lot: I do all my planning in long-hand, in pen, in one of my many A4 sized notebooks. I will often do this sitting in a cafe with a strong coffee to stimulate my creativity. Then the moment I start to write the book, I go to my desk and type everything into my computer. Somehow my long-term ideas seem to flow better when I write by hand, but then the book itself needs to appear in type like a real book.

Are you a planner, or an editor? Again, you'll find some style that works for you. I'll give you some suggestions here that may help you, whether you're at the 20/80 end of the scale of not much planning and lots of changing afterwards or the 80/20 type who prefers to do the work up-front to save lots of editing in the end.

#FORMS OF PLANNING - KNOWING THE END

If you're a 20/80 planner, wishing for maximum flexibility in your creative process while still ensuring that you have some sort of structure in your story, then it may be enough for you to know what the ending of your book will look like.

Often in your beginning, you'll find that posed some sort of question. It may be as straight forward as 'What's going on?' in which case your ending should clarify it for the reader so they say, 'Aha! So that's what was going on.' Murder mysteries tend to fit into this category. It may be more complex, such as 'Why has this character found themselves here when they don't belong?' If so, the ending will need to answer that question: 'The character was there because there was a quest for them to fulfil, and they hadn't been informed of it yet'. This is actually the case, for instance, in the first Jane Blonde™.

Whatever the question that is set out either in the very beginning or certainly when the plot picks up because of a catalyst, you need to provide an answer by the end or run the risk of disappointing your reader to the extent that they never come back for more of your books. This is the reason my editor told me to tie up the loose ends in Jane Blonde Spies Trouble - she knew that leaving it too open, far from enticing people to read more, would actually put them off! Disappointment for the reader probably takes the form of outrage, with them throwing down the book and being incensed that they've just wasted several hours of their life reading something which didn't complete. If you read a murder mystery, and the mystery wasn't solved, how would that make you feel? Frustrated! Imagine if you'd ploughed through the whole of The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo, only to have the crime remain hidden and the murderer stay free. All that family history for nothing! You'd be pretty outraged, I would guess.

So it may simply be enough to ensure that you round off the story with an answer to the question you posed at the top of the story. If you can't think what that answer might be, then perhaps it will help to think of all the classic storylines and recognise that your story fits into one of these archetypes. It's widely accepted that there is only a small number plotlines in the whole history of storytelling, and that every book (or film, or play, or short story) is simply a unique telling of that archetypal story. There isn't as much agreement on how many storylines there are, and it commonly varies between three and thirty six! However, my view is that there are probably five to seven (depending on whether some of these are actually sub-plots or narrative styles of the others).

Classic storylines include:

Romeo and Juliet, or star-crossed lovers, which is the basic background plot to most romances in the world, although they don't all end tragically like the Shakespearean version. The crux of it is that here are two people who probably shouldn't be together

but cannot help themselves. A lovely example of this (and I must confess to only seeing the film, and not reading it first-hand) is *The Adjustment Bureau*. It was depicted as science fiction but actually was as poignant a love story as I've ever seen - and it fits that model entirely: two people who are not meant to be together but somehow have to be.

From just this notion, you can probably guess that 'chick lit' or mum lit/hen lit/lad lit and mainstream romance is often built around this archetype - a couple who shouldn't be together and possibly even hate each other but find out something that changes their mind and fall in love. Elizabeth and D'Arcy, anyone?

Here are some other classic storylines:

Cinderella - or any story of rags-to-riches, low status to stardom, ugly to beautiful, and pretty much every Disney production ever written. And heaps of chick lit where the girl gets her prince. Please be sure to provide a prince in some form or other.

Faustian pact, which means some kind of deal with the Devil in which the blackness of the character's heart leads to their ultimate downfall (based on the Faust legend). A strong example is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde - his only published novel.

The Quest. Find something and use it to conquer all (*Lord of the Rings*). Find several somethings and put them together to conquer all (*Deltora Quest*). Find something or several somethings and destroy them to conquer all (*Harry Potter*).

The Siege - bad guys are invading the good guys, and there must be a battle to end all battles (*War of the Worlds*, many fantasy novels, lots of dystopian Young Adult books, and of course *Deltora Quest*, *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* - which is why it's sometimes not so clear whether this a universal plot-line or the way of telling the story of another plot-line like *The Quest*).

Bear in mind that most of the examples above can also go into the overall universal storyline of 'Good versus Evil', though how evident that this in the story will depend on how it's written.

So how does this help you to work out the ending of your book? It's rather like knowing what question you're asking. Each archetypal storyline demands a certain kind of ending, and if you don't provide it you are likely to upset the reader.

In the *Romeo and Juliet* storyline, if boy didn't meet and girl get the boy (although *Romeo and Juliet* are dead when they get together) the reader would be devastated.

Just think of the legions of teenage girls who would be out for Stephanie Meyer's throat if Edward hadn't won Bella's heart (and Jacob hadn't managed to find someone to love too, creepy though it is).

Similarly, in the Cinderella storyline, if rags don't turn to riches, or nerd turn to hero, or secretary to CEO, the fan-base of readers will soon dwindle. And if Frodo didn't get the ring to Mordor, what a tragic waste of time those three enormous books could be!

For you, then, it might simply be the case that you identify what type of story you're writing. Then you'll know that the ending has to fit. If it's a quest, they have to find the object and use it appropriately. If it's a siege, the goodies will have to win the battle, even if that's after a number of failures to keep the series going. Of course, we can all think of examples where the ending does not fit the archetype, but in general that's either where there's another book to come, or where the style is very literary and the author has played with the form.

So in simple terms:

Romeo and Juliet archetype; ending - lovers get together

Cinderella story ending -girl gets prince/big house/boss' job

Faustian pact ending - character either finds redemption and sees the error of their ways (Scrooge in A Christmas Carol) or gets their come-uppance (Dorian Gray)

The Quest ending - hero find the object (Matthew Reilly novels, science fiction, fantasy), or solves the mystery (crime, thriller)

The Siege ending - the goodies win ... eventually

Just to round up this point, I'll touch on something that concerns many new writers - the issues of being original and therefore protecting your work. As you'll see from the short list above, there are really very few stories in the world, so it's very difficult to claim that an idea is yours and yours alone. Even if something appears that sounds incredibly like your book, it's very, very unlikely that someone has stolen your work. It's far more likely that they just happened to have the same idea and perhaps worked on it more quickly than you, or were in a position to get it out there because they were already published.

By way of example, the author of the Alex Rider series of novels, Anthony Horowitz, was asked why he hadn't carried on with his Groosham Grange series. 'Let me tell you how

that series goes,' he said. 'There's this boy, horribly treated by his adoptive family to the extent that they make him live in a cupboard. Then he discovers he's magic, and goes off to wizarding school, and ...' He didn't need to continue. J K Rowling had come up with something very similar, even while his books were coming out, and somehow she'd done it in such a unique way that it took off and took over. There was no suggestion whatsoever from this very professional and successful author that his ideas had been stolen or plagiarised - he just stopped writing them and moved on to something else: Alex Rider, in fact, which proved to be a huge success. He also writes *Midsummer Murders* and *Foyle's War* for TV, so with a history of spy stories, thrillers and murder mysteries, you can see clearly which archetype his stories all fall into.

What makes your book unique, even if you have the same idea as someone else, is the way that you tell it. Another example - *Jane Blonde*[™]. At the same time as the first *Jane Blonde* came out, another girl spy story was published. It was by an author who had done the same MA as me, at the same time as me, and came out on more or less the same day. Had we ever met and discussed our spy stories? No. Not ever. We didn't actually know each other, and I wrote *Jane Blonde* in the year following my MA. It was coincidence - or common consciousness, or perhaps our similar awareness of a gap in the market - that our similar books were created at similar times.

Then, shortly after the second *Jane Blonde* book had reached the shelves, my publishers received a letter from some American lawyers. Their client was a film-maker who'd had an idea for a girl spy called *Jane Blonde*, and had talked about that idea in England where I lived at one time, and in New Zealand where I lived at another time.

The implication was that I'd followed her around the world to steal her ideas. This was absolute nonsense, of course, but what we had to point out was that the name 'Jane Blonde' is simply a female version of 'James Bond' which anyone could have come up with, and with a name like that she'd be very likely to be a spy. The idea itself was not that original. What I'd *done with it*, however, with my storylines and characters and writing style, was what made my books and my *Jane Blonde* unique. We didn't hear back from the lawyers. Strangely enough, though, it was around this time that I trade-marked *Jane Blonde* and began to use the little [™] symbol you'll have seen in this chapter ...

So now it's your turn. Have a look at the beginning or beginnings you wrote as a result of your What If exercises. What question did you ask? What archetype does it fit? What kind of ending are you likely to require? How will you make it unique?

Great. You've identified an end point, something to aim at, and that may be enough to

sustain you as you write the rest of your book, particularly if you're not a planner and you're happy to correct after you've finished your book. You're going to have a straight, flat plot-line that lies between your question at the beginning and your answer at the end.

Then your creative endeavours will lead you along this path, making sure that you have enough undulations and turn-offs along the way to make the plot interesting, and not as linear as it appears at present.

However, you may have a couple of concerns about this, the first being that you're not sure at this stage whether your creative capabilities are up to levering that plot-line off the floor so you might end up with a plot that is satisfactory, but is essentially dull.

The other concern, and this is perhaps more likely to be the case than flat-lining as above, is that you'll do what I did in the early *Jane Blondes*. Your creative juices will be unleashed, and suddenly you'll go mad! Wild flights of fancy will lead you off in strange directions; intriguing forks in the road will encourage you up the wrong path for a while and even though you *know* it's the wrong path, it's fun so you're just going to stay on it; and fascinating characters will beckon to you from around murky corners and you won't be able to help yourself from seeing what they have to tell you. You'll get to that planned end point at some stage, but not after you've had some very interesting diversions, and probably remembered that other story you'd always intended to write and decided to fit it in here somehow as well. While this may still lead to an entertaining read, you're likely to find yourself with a number of issues which do not work in plotting terms:

Boring bits, or the parts where you're not really sure where you're going but, you know, this field seems quite nice and then there's a house at the end, and anyway, the characters need some time to figure out what's going on and can sit down and have a good old chat about how they ended up here in the first place.

This may involve the odd **flashback** or two. The reader, sadly, doesn't really care. They need to move on. (By way of example, I'm sure I can't be the only one who was practically driven to ripping out pages in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, with their endless roaming around the forest, being moody ...)

Forced diversions, where you've headed up a path and realised that it's not really going to work, so you somehow contort and re-align the plot to get back to your original path and plan.

This will probably look like something else which is a plotting no-no if it isn't done on purpose - **the red herring**. "I've just realised that the book with the clue was actually back there in House A," your hero declares. "I didn't need to come here at all! Thank goodness I worked it out for myself." Yes, but couldn't you have done that back at House A, Maddening Main Character?

Coincidences, which occur when you realise you've backed yourself into a corner and that the only thing that will help is if someone or something appears as if by magic. So as if by magic, they do. The gate-keeper with the keys jangling off his belt happens to wander by, or the tiny mouse that will fit under the door to get the amulet pops his whiskery head out of someone's pocket. "Oh, I forgot I'd brought little Brodie, my pet," your character announces. This is the first time we've heard of Brodie the pet. How convenient that Brodie the pet happened to be there.

Remember, you can get away with introducing useful people and things later in the book, but *only if you've mentioned them earlier in the book*. Mention them earlier and it then becomes a clever literary device known as fore-shadowing. Drop them in unannounced from a great height and that it becomes a non-literary device known as cheating ...

If you're an editor and not a planner, you're going to be content to deal with these at the end, or when your editor or manuscript assessor points them all out to you.

Which they will.

The only creative work that I've ever come across that seems to work despite the fact that it seems to have been written this way is the movie, 'UP'. There are very strange unrelated events, odd characters turning up out of nowhere, plot-turns and coincidences that make no sense at all, and levels of incredulity that test even my outrageous imagination. I think the reason it works is firstly because it's a film and therefore a visual feast, and secondly because of its charm. This is one of those exceptions that proves the rule, however, and I would suggest in general that you don't apply it to writing your novel. But you might like to watch 'UP' so you can see what I mean!

Right. So assuming you're not writing UP 2 and would like to get a better handle on your plot-line, we want to look at a technique that will allow you to avoid the three bug-bears of plotting as outlined above, keeping your readers invested and intrigued and dogging your characters' every step as they stride on towards the end.

Believe it or not, you already know this technique. You just haven't applied it to

plotting. Since I became a planner, I apply it to every single one of my plots, from a picture book of 600 words to one of my adult novels, *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*, which is 83,000 words with three or four different narrators and a very complex plot. And this technique concerns a story you've known all your life:

THE THREE LITTLE PIGS PLOTTING TECHNIQUE

Just as reminder of what happens in *The Three Little Pigs*:

The three little pigs live together at Mummy Pig's house. For some reason they have to leave.

The first little pig builds himself a house of straw. The wolf comes along, and he HUFFS and he PUFFS and he BLOWS THE HOUSE DOWN. (Kids love joining in with this part, and that's because delivering information or speech or displaying things in threes works really well. Give it a go in your dialogue, or your speeches and presentations!)

The house of straw is destroyed, so the first little pig runs to the second little pig who builds his house of sticks. The wolf comes along, and he HUFFS and he PUFFS and he BLOWS THE HOUSE DOWN. The house of sticks is destroyed, so the two little pigs run to the third little pig.

The third little pig builds his house of bricks. The wolf comes along, and he HUFFS and he PUFFS and he CAN'T BLOW THE HOUSE DOWN.

So he climbs up the chimney. At the bottom of the chimney is a boiling pot, and depending on the version you know, the wolf burns his bottom and runs off, or sometimes he falls in and is eaten. In the eight or nine-year-old boy version, somehow EVERYBODY DIES!!

Anyway, after the wolf is dispatched, the three little pigs live together in the brick house, happily ever after.

In simple visual terms, it looks like this.

Home LEAVE! 1 pig 2 pig 3 pig CHIMNEY Home

The first thing you'll notice is that the end looks identical to the beginning, but the reader knows that everything has changed. This pleasing circularity is a very common feature of books (and film too) - where the ending appears to be very much like the beginning, but the character has overcome a number of challenges and is completely

different, and has got the girl, turned their rags to riches, won the war and so on. If your aim is just to identify your ending, then it's useful to remember that you can have the same setting and the same kind of event as your beginning, but you're going to have to show that while it looks the same, it's actually very different.

Back to our three little pigs. They're happily at home, and then they have to leave. This departure is the catalyst for the story, sometimes known as the bomb because it explodes and throws normality or routine into chaos. As we discussed in chapter 2, your catalyst may come sometime after the beginning, or it may be entwined with your opening.

Next, we have what might be described as a peak of activity. The first house is built, small and weak, with the pig trying to defend himself against the challenge in the story but failing. Driven back down to basics, he has to gather his forces again and head off to the next challenge.

With the second little pig, we have another peak of activity, bigger than the previous one but still not big enough. Back down they go, then head off to face a bigger challenge still.

The brick house provides a third peak of activity, bigger and better than both the previous two, but still not quite enough!

And then we have the chimney event, where good fights evil, the cleverness of the characters thwarts the baddy, and the climax of the story all takes place to lead to a satisfactory conclusion. But it's still not quite the end, because the pigs have still to re-group, reflect on their success, and show that they have matured enough because of the challenges they've faced and beaten to live together in their own home.

Visually, this looks like this:

Beginning Bomb Peak1 Peak2 Peak3 CHIMNEY End

This is a simple, workable structure that enables you to be guided through your story, knowing you have: enough peaks and troughs to cut out the boring bits; enough down-time for the protagonists to reflect on what's gone on and what they need to do better; a satisfying clamber to the all-important 'chimney event' where the denouement/climax/exposition/final fight is going to take place, pulling all your plots and sub-plots together into one wonderful triumphant revelation that makes the reader shout, 'Aha! So that's what it was all about, Miss Marple', and all this is sandwiched

between a beginning and end that look the same but are remarkably different

So how do you apply this to your planning process? Again, it will depend on how much of work you want to do up-front, before the fun creative part begins and you start writing. You might want to plot your story just like the diagrams above, with a word or two per peak and chimney event.

For instance, let's imagine you were writing a story about how not to write a story. We'll include the three bug-bears of plotting from above. Our character is called Red (for Herring), and visually the plot for his story could go like this:

Red WRITE!! Boring Diversions Coincidence EDIT! Red

Okay, so it might not be the most fascinating story ever (it's going to look rather like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in fact) but you can see that Red would start with the quest of having to write. He'll go through the first hurdle of Boring Bits, and then consider what he's doing wrong. I know, he'll say, I need a Diversion! He'll try that and it won't work, so on reflection he'll work out that he needs something more dramatic, and will enter the Challenge of Coincidences. But none of those people and interventions helped, he will discover - no, not at all! There's nothing for it. He's going to have to jump right into the overall battle, and edit the mad story to make sense of it! Ouch. It will hurt; it will be hard, but Red will emerge triumphant. And then by the end, he will still look like Red Herring from the beginning, but where Red at the start was not a writer, Red at the end has discovered much about the challenges facing writers and how to overcome them that he is a fully-fledged story-teller and author.

Again, the three peaks and the chimney can fit into the archetype and genre:

For chick lit it can be three different guys, three different countries, three different dates in restaurants (which is all sounding rather like *Eat, Pray, Love*);

For siege narratives it can be three battle zones followed by the chimney of Armageddon;

For Faustian pact stories it could be first murder by accident, second murder enjoyed, third murder sought and planned, chimney mass murder but somehow murderer is killed or redeemed (*Perfume*, by Patrick Susskind, is along these lines);

Get the idea? It doesn't have to be complex at this stage, but you're just allowing yourself to see a way through your story, moving from one event to a bigger one, to a bigger one still, and then working it all out in the final chimney event.

If you're writing literary fiction, you can still go through this pattern but the 'peaks' may be flatter - more like rolling hills.

Now that may be enough planning and plotting for you. Suddenly you may see a way through the morass of information that you knew you were going to have to tackle, and that could be sufficient to help you plough through your story.

What if it's a longer story, though? You may be writing a novel of 60,000 words, divided into twenty five chapters. In that case I would suggest that you look at it this way, with each number being the chapters included in that peak of activity (in which case you should allow that the last chapter in that peak will have the most action in it, then a little downtime for the character to reflect and the reader to have a rest):

1 2-3 4-8 9-14 15 - 20 21 - 24 25

Then you might have an idea of what's happening in each block. For example,

Chapter 1	Meet Fred, who is broke, depressed and alcoholic, and praying for help
2 and 3	Fred is left lamp in grandparents' will
4 to 8	Finds genie, tricky
9 - 14	Genie disappears, leaves even bigger mess at home
15- 20	Finds Genie, evil!
21- 24	Fights Evil Genie for lamp, massively valuable, and finds Genie's stolen gold
25	Fred, doesn't need help.

Again, visually this might look this this.

Fred LAMP genie genie gone Genie Evil **GOLD!!** Fred

That simple mapping will give you enough information about what's going on in each section of the book to know how much to write per chapter, and how much drama to go through in each peak of activity. It would be no good, for instance, if Fred discovered the Genie's gold collection when he first found the lamp. He could just pay off his debts, check himself into rehab and that story would be over. He needs to acquire information slowly and build some enmity with the Genie to lead to the final battle for the gold (which Fred finds is what he really needs to help him, rather than a Genie ... or

rather, he needs the courage and strength to fight for what he needs and in this case it takes the form of gold).

What I like to do is go one stage further. With this more detailed plan in mind, I then go on to write a paragraph for each chapter so that I know more or less what will happen in that chapter. Then, when I know exactly what direction I'm going in, I can sit back, enjoy the journey, and let that creative impulse flow into my writing. Having done a lot of planning, I can be sure of knowing that the story will be in very good shape by the time I've finished, unless I suddenly allow myself a diversion (and if that seems to be happening for good reason then I follow it). And of course, the amount of editing required to get it all into shape will be minimal.

For example,

Chapter 1 Fred has just been kicked out of the half-way house he's stayed in for the past year (interruption to routine). Depressed, he considers throwing himself off the motorway bridge. Help appears and he assumes it's an angel. Actually it's a solicitor from one of those 'lost fortune' programmes, coming to tell him about his granny's will.

Chapter 2: Granny's will reading reveals that he's been left nothing but a bunch of old furniture. He goes to the house etc

Later, I'll sit my notebook beside my laptop, remind myself of roughly what's going on in each chapter, and then begin to write. If you're wondering how it's possible to turn a paragraph into 3000 words for a chapter, just wait for the information on showing not telling ...

Okay, so now you have planned your beginning, your ending, and how to avoid doughnuts and disappointments. You have answered your question from the beginning - should I plot, or not? And you've also gone through the same technique for discovering plotting techniques:

Plot? Novel No Ending only Three pigs Planned notes Plot

So how do you plot like this if you have complex sub-plots and multiple narrators?

It's relatively straight-forward, actually. Just have the sub-plot or second (or third) narrator going along at the same pace, in the same pattern, just one step behind the main plotline. It could almost look like a shadow of the three peaks. Then in the chimney, remembering that your chimney might be five or six short, choppy, pacy

chapters, you pull them all together for a satisfying conclusion.

And how might this plotting technique apply if you're planning a trilogy or a series?

Again, it's quite simple. Just take all your characters back to a new CATALYST, so they get new information that they have to deal with by way of a three-peaks-and-a-chimney journey. However, they're not starting right back at the beginning as if they've forgotten everything that happened in the first book. You'll need to re-introduce them, but do it quickly and efficiently and don't spend four chapters re-capping on what went on in Book 1. Just take a deep breath, let them say hello, and then introduce a new 'bomb' to let them set off on a new and exciting adventure.

A final point on this plotting technique: workshop participants often ask me if this isn't just 'formulaic' and 'Mills and Boon'. My thoughts on this are as follows:

firstly, Mills and Boon is the best-selling book brand of all time, so they're getting something right and I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss them;

secondly, this is a structure rather than a formula. It's been present in story-telling throughout time (just think of myths and legends, three act plays, fairy tales) which is why we find it satisfying and shouldn't be worried about using it;

and thirdly, as with all good writing, when you implement it properly, any structure or planning or formula or whatever you want to call it becomes completely invisible to the reader.

So you can be as subtle as you choose with all of the above, and the reader will just become absorbed in your wonderful novel. As indeed, they should ...

KEEPING ON KEEPING ON

All of this is for nothing if you can't make yourself sit down and keep writing. In the last chapter, we talked about beating procrastination and getting started. As this chapter is about sticking to the path and following it through to a satisfactory end, I'd like to share some ideas with you that might help if you're feeling demotivated, as often happens to writers in the middle of the book.

Write the end wherever you're up to. If you're struggling through Chapter Five and thinking of throwing in the towel, try considering that excellent ending you planned for yourself. Then write it. Somehow knowing that the book can be finished and the ending will be great can spur you onwards to completing it. And if you consider that all you're

doing in chapters six to twelve as filling in the gaps so you can reach that wonderful end point, it will seem less daunting.

Don't over-edit. Particularly if you've planned and plotted quite well, you won't need to spend ages poring over yesterday's work to make sure you're on the right track. You've chosen your route and it's working - just stick to it, and then go over it once you've finished the whole thing. I tend to read half a page of what I wrote yesterday, just to get back into my character's head and my writer's voice, and then I plough on.

Write something else. By this, I don't mean start another book, unless you're convinced that that's the way you'll work best. Just write something - an email, a letter, a blog entry - just to get into the swing of writing again. Then you can return to the book which was looking huge and overwhelming and start anew, refreshed and energised after your little amuse-bouche to whet the appetite.

Change your environment. Sometimes, just knowing that you're sitting at the same old desk in the same old dining room with the same old book in front of you that you've been working on for EVER can just make the whole task seem much more daunting. A change of scenery can work really well to extract you from this sensation that writing your book has become a chore, or worse still, your job. A job that you're not even getting paid for. Take it somewhere fun. I sometimes find that my office becomes too quiet, so if I head off to a cafe and work in some ambient noise then I become invigorated again. Plus, they have nice coffee. Most of my recent books have been half-written in cafes.

Book a work-space When I know I'm going to have to get my head down and work solidly for a week or two to break the back of a book, I hire myself an office somewhere else. Yes, I have a perfectly good desk and space at home, but there is nothing more guaranteed to make me turn up somewhere and write than knowing that I've paid for it. There's the added benefit of changing your environment, too, and it's especially nice if you're in a designated writer's office or similar and can feel like a real writer while you're rubbing shoulders with other authors. (Don't worry, they're all at the same stage as you).

Don't beat yourself up Sometimes I go off-plan. I do. I suddenly feel the urge to head somewhere else and I very often follow that impulse. That's only because I'm relaxed enough to know that I'm still working towards that same ending; I just might take a different route to get there.

Usually this only happens when I'm climbing the third peak, because by that stage I'm many thousands of words into the book, and by now this story is really telling itself and the characters are my new family, so I know and trust everything enough to know that if that's the way it's meant to go, then so be it. Don't beat yourself up or plan yourself into a complex; go with the flow. You can always sort it out at the end if you don't like where you've ended up, and at least you will have kept on keeping on.

As with plotting, all these practical suggestions are to enable you to immerse yourself in your writing. There's no substitute for just getting on with it, but with 80,000 words and a slot of two hours every other day ahead of you, it can be very daunting. Plan ahead, both in writing and lifestyle, and you'll find it all much more easily achievable.

Then, with your story mapped out, you can get on and write it! We'll follow some more peaks and troughs in the next chapter with your character's development, but for now feel free to sit down and write - even if that 'writing' is drawing three peaks and a chimney, then sketching out some chapter synopses! It's still creative, honestly. Go to it, and enjoy.

SOMETHING TO TRY

For the story you started writing a chapter back, draw a bomb, three peaks and a chimney, and pop a few words on each.

Map out your sub-plots in the same way.

Write chapter outlines for your first three chapters, and the last one (and all the others in between if you feel like it).

Summary

Doughnut middles and disappointing endings are commonplace in novel-writing, especially when tackling very long pieces of work. Planning ahead can help.

There's often a direct ratio between the amount of planning done by the writer, and the amount of editing that will have to take place when it's completed. Aim for a higher percentage of planning to editing.

Think of the ending - does it answer your question? What's the right ending for your archetypal story? Working towards your ending can help you stay on track. You may even want to write the ending first.

The three little pigs technique enables you to plot effectively, irrespective of the size or type of book you're working on. It's ideal for any genre or position on the literary-commercial spectrum (remembering that for literary work, it's more subtle) - and once learned, it's never forgotten!

Sometimes it can be hard to stay on track with the writing process, particularly in the middle of the book when the ending seems a long way ahead and you're sure that what you're writing must be dull and stodgy. Try some practical solutions to stay motivated.

Chapter 4 Of Fine Character

So far, we have discussed plotting, planning and procrastination.

Now it's time to begin to consider the other crucial element of your novel - the people in it.

How much detail you go into in deciding on your character up front is going to be down to your style, how much you like to plan, and whether you already have a feel for your characters.

Remember, too, that at the literary end of the spectrum your book may be all about a character, with less emphasis on plot or storyline. At the other end of that spectrum, your commercial novel's characters may require less development as it's the plot that carries the book. Think about *The Da Vinci Code*, for instance: the central character of Robert is quite bland as a character, but he knows a lot and has adventures thrust upon him. His role is more as a signpost for the next segment of the quest - if we follow this clue, we'll end up here.

In this chapter, we'll consider characters and their development, because it's good for us as novelists to have thought these things through at least a little. It's character building, in fact ...

Don't you hate it when people say things like that to you? Go on, it's character building. Face your fears, it's good for you. Jump off this tall building, you won't regret it. Kids especially hate it as it's all very similar to those dreaded words ... 'just do it, because I said so.'

But when it comes to your characters, while you may be lucky enough to find that you don't have to work at them terribly hard, the likelihood is that there will be at least one or two characters that you have to create from scratch. You have to *build* them from the ground up, starting by digging some firm foundations. And then when you've traced their steps up several storeys, you may take them to the top of that tall building, tell them to jump, and see how they react. Their response will tell you and the reader everything you need to know about the person you've created, and if it doesn't, then it's possible you don't yet know enough about that character.

Where characters come from

For me, there are two ways that the characters for my books are formed: some are made, and some

make themselves.

The ones who make themselves:

Certain characters have a way of appearing in your head completely fully-formed. These are the ones that make themselves. There's no saying where they came from (unless you can work it out with a few years of therapy), but suddenly there they are, telling you what to say on their behalf, instructing you as to what they would do in a given situation. When you take these characters to the top of a tall building, without hesitation they will give you a shove instead, or whip out their parachute and leap, or run in the opposite direction towards the safety ladder. Let's face it, they may even be the ones to take you to the top of a tall building.

You may have heard that J K Rowling first met Harry Potter on a train when he walked into her head as a real live boy, complete with a zigzag scar and broken spectacles. The same was true for me with a character in Jane Blonde - though not, interestingly, Jane Blonde herself. No, the character who appeared in my head, resplendent in lycra, Day-Glo accessories and a penchant for rapping was Jane Blonde's tutor, G-Mamma. She even arrived with her own name, which she thought was cool for a middle-aged rap star, and also a contemporary version of the more traditional 'godmother' which is what she really is for Janey Brown/Jane Blonde. From the very outset, G-Mamma told me what to say about her, gave me awful raps to write down, and even told me what clothes to dress her in. I've never once had to question her motives, or think how she'd react in a given situation, or wonder what she's going to say, because she does it all for me. Bossy she may be, but that kind of character is a gift. Ignore them at your peril!

What's also interesting to me as the creator of G-Mamma (ha! or so she lets me believe, she's telling me now) is that I can actually *see* her. Often I don't have a very clear idea of what my characters look like, and I can live with that. As long as I have a fundamental grasp of how someone behaves, and feels, and reacts, then I'd rather leave their appearance to the imagination of the reader. Many authors are the same; they'll have a complete sense of their character's personality traits, but no absolute image of how they look.

And what does G-Mamma look like? You may well ask. Many, many readers imagine that she's a cuddly African-American lady. Aretha Franklyn's name has been bandied about a fair bit in relation to G-Mamma, or Queen Latifah. And if that's how the reader sees her, then I'm not going to disabuse them of the notion. However, in my mind she has always - always - looked like Dawn French in a curly blonde wig. Until now. Until my new 'right now'. These days, I can see that Miranda Hart would be the perfect G-Mamma. I could almost have based the character on Miranda,

if I'd known about her when I was writing this character!

I tend to know what my characters feel like rather than how they look, so it's fine by me if the reader takes that information and translates it into someone who fits the bill in their own imagination. The extent to which you describe someone's appearance will be affected by a few things: how important it is to the book overall, how much it matters to you as an author and reader to know what the character looks like, and what genre you are writing in. You'll see the character's appearance described more in chick lit than many other genres, for instance, and in pure romance it can be quite overdone - but this could matter to the reader.

With any appearance descriptions, beware of listing them out like a police 'wanted' notice, going through each detail from glossy chestnut shoulder-length hair with occasional blonde highlights on the crown down to tips of their red-soled Laboutin shoes. Try to avoid the 'cheat' version of doing this too, which is to have them pass by a mirror and describe their appearance to themselves:

"She wasn't looking her best this morning. At five nine, slender, with long legs and flashing green eyes, she was normally in great shape by now, but not today. Her shoulder-length, chestnut hair with expensive blonde highlights had lost its usual gloss. Her ears, carefully pinned back by the best plastic surgeon in the city, were pink from the weight of her solid gold earrings. She looked down at her chin. It was usually a perfect chin ..."

Far better to drop in the odd detail here and there, so the reader builds up a picture over a chapter or two rather than having a virtual tour of the character's entire frame.

And while we're on the subject of appearance and fully-formed characters - what if the character is actually you? What if this is your memoir-based novel and you know exactly what the character looks like because it's exactly how you look, in fact?

Well, again, my advice would be to go for the 80/20 rule: utilise some aspects of your appearance that may be significant - flat feet, flat stomach, flat nose - so you still feel that connection, but then fill in the rest of the detail (if you want to) with something other than your own appearance. Then you'll separate yourself nicely from the story, again, and you won't say anything about yourself that people who know you may disagree with.

The ones who are made:

It's not necessarily your main character who has the foresight to help you out by turning up ready-made. In my case it's usually the side-kicks who do this. With the central characters, it can be necessary to gather information, to decide how, where and when they're going to carry the plot for

you, and give them the means to do that.

For instance, Jack Bootle-Cadogan who is the main character in *Doghead* (now *Jack BC and The Curse of Anubis*) was created backwards, from the point where all I knew about the plot was that a boy would discover he'd been cursed to become Anubis, Egyptian God of Death (actually of Embalming, but you're allowed to stretch the truth in your writing). Suddenly I remembered a visit I had made many years ago to Highclere Castle in Hampshire, England - the castle that is now featuring in the TV series, *Downton Abbey*. That was - is - the home of the Carnarvon family, and one of the ancestral Carnarvons was the Lord who discovered the tomb of Tutenkhamen. It's a fascinating place to look around, with hidden drawers holding Egyptian artefacts and a dusty museum with authentic relics and tools.

The moment I remembered that, I knew that the boy-who-turned-into-Anubis would have to live there. Then, rather than that rags-to-riches story of the Cinderella archetype, I thought it would be fun if the boy had riches, but wanted rags. And that's how Jack Bootle-Cadogan came about - a posh, rich boy who lives in a castle with everything most people would dream of, including their own butler, who wishes only to be normal and go to the local state school.

This fed into the story fantastically well, because not only would he be considered far from normal because of his upbringing and background, but then he would start to develop the head of a dog, which would single him out from just about everybody. That's exactly how Jack's character came about: a boy who considers himself completely ordinary who is doing his very best to convince everyone else of the same, with all the odds increasingly stacked against him.

His name, by the way, was also created backwards. I started off calling him Seth, which I thought was an unusual name for a book character with a nice Egyptian God ring to it. Then I started doing more research, and discovered that Seth featured rather a lot in Egyptian mythology and was quite a nasty piece of work, so the name of Seth would have to apply to the evil nemesis that our hero is trying to thwart. Searching for a name for my boy, I came up with the name he should have had all along. He is cursed to be part-dog, but not any old dog - an ancient Egyptian dog. He is, of course, part jackal.

And so Seth became Jack. The surname Cadogan (pronounced Caduggan) comes from a lovely shop that I used to pass in Winchester, UK, which seemed to me to epitomise all things posh. I then combined it with Bootle which is a place in England, but which I actually borrowed from the Gerald Durrell book of *My Family and Other Animals*. It's the name of the coracle that his brothers made him for his birthday and christened 'The Bootle Bumtrinket'. I've loved that book for thirty

years or more and just found the words incredibly pleasurable to say aloud. I added it to Cadogan, and my lovely lad Jack Bootle-Cadogan finally had his full and rightful name. It's also very useful that it abbreviates to Jack BC, which sounds suitably historical and perhaps a little godly.

One of the most satisfying characters I've created is David Osgood in *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*. I honestly have no idea where he came from, and I didn't know what his agenda was when I started to write the book. I knew that his character would be a very long way from 'beautiful', but hadn't really planned out what had caused his character flaw.

Then I happened to turn on a programme on TV discussing certain personality types, and it all became incredibly clear. Once I had that information, the actions and characteristics that I'd already been writing about fell into place, and I was able to back them up with more detail and other incidents which described him more fully.

He changes his name throughout the story, and this is significant for the plot - and for the character of David. Really, the book is all about the women whose lives he affects, and they all appeared in my head quite well-formed, but the character of David had a few foundation stones, and then the walls flew up from the moment I'd discovered what was driving him. I've found on many, many occasions that the universe can be very kind to writers by presenting them with a missing link, a hidden motive, a solution to the problem they're facing, or even the name of a character ...

Whichever way you create the people who will populate your novel, the critical point is that you must know your character well enough that you can release information about them to the reader little by little. It's fine for you to know every freckle on their pert up-turned nose intimately, but you might want to leak that image to your audience over time. You might - you should - be fully aware of every fight Fred ever had with his teacher or his brother, but you won't want to list them all out unless it's crucial for the story. You will want to know all these facts, however, so there is never any doubt in your mind as to how Fred would react if a battle was ensuing, or how Freckly Freda would feel if someone pointed out for the millionth billionth time that lemon juice might work. It's for you to know, and the reader to find out.

You can establish some of this background information in a number of ways. You might like to internet-research someone who you know is rather like your character and compile a dossier on them. You could combine the characteristics of several people you know (I often do this). You might carry out a mock interview with them, asking questions like: 'What would you do if I took you to the top of a tall building and told you to jump?' Or you could simply find out what their favourite colour/food/celebrity/music is and then know enough about them to feel you could

respond on their behalf to any situation.

Here are some of the topics you might wish to consider.

Name:

I've talked somewhat about how names can be created, and sometimes they just come to you. The name of the character for my new series, Matilda Peppercorn, was gifted to me by my mother who found it in some old parish records from the nineteenth century, although she's very different to a nineteenth century girl. The name of her best friend, Mattan Lundquist, came about because I wanted Matilda's best friend to be called Matilda as well. Matilda Peppercorn's name is shortened to Tilly, and Matilda Lundquist's name is shortened to Mattan because she's Swedish. Her surname was suggested by one of my Swedish friends as a popular Swedish surname.

On the subject of names, you might also want to consider what the name of your book might be. Once you've thought about it, Google it to see if it already exists. You'll be very surprised what's out there!

For instance, as mentioned, my own new series was due to be called The Nine Lives of Matilda Peppercorn, with each book in the series named after a breed of cat. When I decided to publish it through my own new publishing company with its original title - when, in truth, it was just about to go off for publication - I happened to be watching TV (yes, again!).

Up popped some lady in a vox-box, saying how much she was enjoying the TV series 'The Nine Lives of Chloe King.' I wasn't even sure I'd heard her correctly to begin with, so I leapt up and did some Googling.

Sure enough, a new TV series was out called 'The Nine Lives of Chloe King', about a girl with cat-like powers, and based on a series of books with the same title. There was I, thinking I was being all original with *absolutely no idea* about this other series, when actually it had already been monopolised.

Now, there's no copyright on titles, so I could have pressed ahead with 'The Nine Lives of Matilda Peppercorn', especially knowing that the content of my own series *would* be

entirely original. However, I didn't want to appear to be jumping on any feline bandwagons, and besides, some of the joy over my title disappeared once I discovered it was already out there. So that was another reason for changing the name of the series, and the books within it.

I've stuck to Matilda Peppercorn. To begin with, I have a certain brand now, with books where the series is someone's name, and each book has a specific title. Jane Blonde: Sensational Spylet. Jack BC and the Curse of Anubis. Matilda Peppercorn: Switch.

Apart from that, I like the flexibility in the name 'Matilda', and think that 'Matilda Peppercorn' sounds like an unusual girl, which indeed she is.

Think about the character you want to establish. Characters who are your normal, everyday kind of boy, girl, guy or gal could have a normal, everyday type of name, which will convey instantly that they are an 'every man' kind of individual whom everyone can relate to. Larger-than-life characters can have larger-than-life, unusual names - G-Mamma, Hagrid, Mr Pip, Stephanie Plum and so on.

If you want to start from scratch, an interesting exercise is to take an ordinary name and change a letter or two to turn it into something more evocative - for instance:

Eg JILL becomes JALL or VILL

I would see Jall as a sci-fi character, leading disenfranchised villagers to new lands, and Vill perhaps as the kind of guy who gets everyone else into trouble but somehow escapes scott free. Just by altering a couple of letters, I get very clear images not just of a person, but of their setting, their role as primary or secondary character, and even their motivation for their activities.

Age:

Mention age if it's significant for the book and the reader. If your character is retiring from the police, or going to university, it might be important to mention the age if this isn't being done at the usual times one would retire from the police, or go to university.

For children's books, the child reader likes to read upwards a bit, so if you plan to mention it, then make it at the top end of your age bracket or even very slightly above

it. If you don't plan to mention it, then you'll need to make it a little clearer by where they are at school, what kind of hobbies they have and so on. I don't mention Jane Blonde's age at all, so when readers ask me how old she is, I turn it around and ask them how old they are. Whether they tell me they're nine or thirteen, I nod knowingly and say, "She's just about the same age as you."

You don't have to know when your character's birthday is as it may not come up at all. If you're writing a series or a longer book that covers a reasonable period of time, then your character is going to have a birthday somewhere in there. Milestone birthdays like 21, 30, 40, 50 and so on are likely to have an impact on the character, so it might be good to incorporate that into the plot. Birthdays are hugely significant for children; they start counting the days to the next one practically as soon as the last one's over, so think about the significance for your character.

Appearance:

As I've mentioned, you may or may not need to mention every detail about the appearance of your character, but it might help for you to know it so that you can drip-feed it in for your reader.

Family arrangement:

What kind of family does your character have? Do they have one at all? Has the fact that they were the oldest and had to look after their siblings affect your character's views on having children/feeling worthy/how spoilt the siblings were? Did it sway their career choice? Are they now home again having to look after elderly parents, or home with toddlers, or homeless because of the step-father? This can all be extremely pertinent to the plot.

In children and YA novels, the central characters are often orphans or separated from their families in some way, and there's a reason for that - with too many adults in the way, they can't go off and have their adventures. It's often the case that the whole plotline is built around the child finding out something about their parents, or avenging their family's downfall, or dealing with something that happened to their family before their time. Don't be afraid to kill off the parents - though possibly not during the book itself (depending on the type and age of book you're writing). And think about the

impact that the child's placement in the family has on the story, and on their character development.

What makes them laugh and cry?

This question is just to make you delve a little deeper into your character's psyche. If they laugh at misery, what kind of laugh is it, and does it mean they're evil? One of my best friends cries with laughter at anyone falling over and potentially hurting themselves, but she's the loveliest person ever. That form of what the Germans call 'Schadenfreude', or joy at things going wrong, is the backbone to a lot of slapstick comedy, and many people find it comical. But some people are just plain mean. Think about what it means for your character specifically - does it show that they're nervous, kind, sorrowful, hardened by life? Are they unable to cry? All these little factors can demonstrate a certain type of personality.

What underwear do they have on?

Okay, this is just a bit of fun to help you focus in on the character again. It's all very easy to point out what they're wearing on top, but what underwear they have on can speak volumes about someone. The wearer of navy blue knickers is a very different character to the character wearing long white bloomers, or pink frilly pants. #

What you're also discussing here is what someone might like to keep secret, or hidden. Just by thinking about what kind of undies they have on, you could inform yourself and your reader about something tragic, funny, perverted, or poignant in the life of your character. And it may be that central aspect of their character that drives them to act in the way they do. It could inform the whole plot and character arc, in fact. It was something related to this that really made David Osgood's warped character fall into place for me ... (now you'll have to read it to find out!).

Numbers of characters:

You can have a lone soldier, or a pair of best buddies, or a trio of intrepid travellers, a couple of couples. Beyond that, it starts to get a bit more complicated, particularly when you're getting into issues of narrative voice and who is telling the story, which we'll cover in the next chapter.

In general, odd numbers tend to work better than even numbers. Just think of the Famous Five, and the Secret Seven, and the triumvirate of Harry, Hermione and Ron. Why do odd numbers work better? Because there is always the potential for conflict - for one outsider, for someone feeling left out. You can still have this with four, of course, but then it's much easier to divide evenly and then there's not so much anguish.

Child/adult characters:

For the children's writers among you, a key fact to remember is that kids like to read about other kids, even if they're older 'children' of fourteen or fifteen. They like to recognise themselves in the characters (as we all do, no matter what age we are). Writers who are new to children's writing often find it terribly difficult to leave themselves out of it, and spend a lot of time incorporating adult characters into the main list of important people in the shape of Wise Dad, or Kind Nana, or Special Teacher.

The golden rule is that it's fine to make your adult character a very significant character, but usually only if they are very 'child-like' themselves. Many of the most beloved adult characters in children's books are just big kids. They are mostly innocent, bumbling, funny, endearing, unusually adventurous, dreamy and imaginative and so on, as you will recall if you think of many of the adult characters children love: Hagrid, Badjelly the Witch, the BFG, G-Mamma, Willy Wonka ...

Alternatively, adult characters should be very grown up indeed. They might be all-knowing, or all-evil, or wise beyond measure. These adult characters are likely to be mentors, masters, teachers, often the enemy, and sometimes parents or care-givers.

However, not all books about children are for children. There is often a temptation to drop books into the 'children's books' category, or nowadays the 'young adult' genre, because they feature a child and the publisher and bookseller is therefore not quite sure where it fits. Some examples of this would be *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas*, and *The Lovely Bones*. These are all read and studied in schools by children, but I would question whether any of them is actually a children's book.

They're all fabulous novels, of course, and you will notice that they're all positioned at the literary end of the spectrum and feature unusual child characters in unusual - often tragic - circumstances.

This is also true of many memoirs of childhood; the gritty ones tend to garner most interest. If this is the style of book you're writing, you can be set free by the notion that even though you're writing

about a child, you are actually writing adult fiction and can therefore be as grown-up as you like about it, without being constrained by the different needs for the child reader.

Character development

That might seem like an awful lot of construction to go into a couple of new characters, and if they appear fully-fledged, you may not need to go into any of that at all. However, if you make the effort to find out this kind of information about your character, you may just find that they start to write themselves before your eyes, and pretty soon they become as robust and solid as your fully-formed hero.

Now that you have a good grasp of that hero's personality as your story begins, we'll delve into what you will probably have heard of before as the character 'arc'. This just means how the character changes throughout the story, and it's very much the point at which character meets plot. Remember all those challenges we established in your 'peaks of activity' during the plotting chapter? They will have had an impact on the character, for good or ill, and it is these interventions that cause the character to change and grow, to develop in some direction.

Depending on who your character is and what role they play, their development may take different trajectories, and this is often related to a change in status. The bullying boss who starts out as all-powerful in the beginning - ie HIGH status - will have a reversal so that they end up as LOW status. Meanwhile the protagonist (your hero or heroine) will have had a similar reversal but in the opposite direction, from low status to high status.

It may be subtle, but there is still the probability that some shift in status has occurred, even if it's only a rise in the character's self-awareness. In my favourite adult novel, *How To Be Good* by Nick Hornby, the character goes from questioning her ability to be happy in the outset, through various means to try to find personal satisfaction again including being 'good', to a realisation that she already had what most people need to lead satisfactory lives. Then, in the very last line, there's a little throwaway remark which demonstrates just how slight her character development has been. It's brilliantly done, and provides us with an unusual ending that slides this book from the commercial and funny (and it's laugh-out-loud hilarious in some moments) along that spectrum to the clever, thought-provoking literary end.

Of course, the change may be very dramatic indeed: from ordinary boy to wizard, from ordinary teen to vampire, from secretary to CEO. The extent and type of development

will depend on your book, your plot, and the kind of ending you want to present to your reader, but in most cases you will move your main character in some way from lowly to powerful, and your baddy/enemy/antagonist from powerful to lowly.

At the other end of the scale, some of the changes may be less obvious. If someone's become unafraid of public speaking, for instance, it's going to be quite evident from the way they hold themselves on stage, speaking confidently and loudly without deafening the audience with the knocking of their knees.

However, if their development is that they've accepted, say, the death of their father, then it could be much more subtle, shown just in the way they take the rubbish out the night before the dustbin men are due to arrive, like Father always did, rather than first thing in the morning when your character would do it even though that causes Mother considerable anxiety. Just that one little piece of action would show how your character has matured, become less selfish, and stepped into a paternal role that they might have been avoiding to this point.

Whatever the scale of the change, it might help you to consider how those factors we looked at while building your character might have altered by the end of your book. I like to compare this arc with the process we all go through when learning any new skill, which is moving from a level of ignorance through to the attainment of knowledge.

For example, remember learning to drive? First of all you sat in a car bristling with strange stalks and curious pedals, none of which made any sense at all. You didn't know just how much you didn't know about cars.

Then you had a few lessons, and ouch, how they hurt. The ridiculous things you did at that stage! "When I said go straight across at the roundabout, I didn't mean go straight across the roundabout." You were aware that you knew some things now, but not enough. Nowhere near enough.

A few lessons later, and you took your test. To everyone's astonishment, not least your own, you passed! That still didn't prevent you from shaking with fear every time you took the car out on your own, but gradually that terror dissipated.

To be honest, it disappeared completely. To the extent that you'd write emails on your

laptop in traffic jams if it weren't illegal ... drive past your own house in a dream if it weren't for the Sat Nav shouting at you and your wife waving frantically in the doorway. You're so comfortable with driving now that you don't even think about it.

Unless you crash the car, or park in a neighbour's drive by mistake. Then you think about. Oh boy, do you think about it. All the time. In fact, that fear is creeping back in again ...

So now you will have learned that in learning, we go through four stages:

We don't know what we don't know, or what's called UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

We know how much we don't know: CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

We know how much we know and don't know: CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

We just know: UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

Try applying that to your newly-acquired skills in writing a novel! What stage would you say you were at before you opened your first chapter? Where are you now? When do you think you'll get to the stage of unconscious competence?

From my own point of view, I would say that I am at the unconscious competence level in novel writing when I'm at my computer completely wrapped up in my book, to the degree that I don't notice what time it is, where I am, or that any other world exists than the one in my head that's now transferring to the white space before my eyes.

When I'm planning, I'm in conscious competence - I know what it's going to take to make the novel work, so I consider my challenges and tackle them one by one by plotting and building my characters.

If I have to write something new, though, I slip back a stage or two, like when I started writing CVs for a professional CV company, tying together my two backgrounds in Human Resources and writing. Easy, I thought. I was in HR fifteen years and knew a thing or two about interviews and jobs. As for writing? Well, I've published fifteen books, so it should be a doddle.

So what stage was this?

Yep. Unconscious incompetence. I thought I knew a lot more about it than I did. Okay, so I'd been in HR for a decade and a half, but that was over ten years ago. And writing a novel is nothing like writing a CV. I'd just assumed I could apply those same skills, and of course, I can - but I have to do it in a completely different way.

So at that stage I **didn't know what I didn't know**.

Then I got my first CV to write. It took me forever. I, who had read thousands of CVs in my career, could no longer remember what they were meant to look like, could not think which skill would be more important to list than another, and found it very hard to take information provided by someone else and format it so it still looked and sounded like them but in a way that would definitely get them an interview.

When I write a novel, it pours out of my head without reference to any other information apart from an occasional glance at my chapter summary. This time, I had old CVs and scribbled notes and sample documents spread all over my desk, all in the wrong order, and somehow I was expected to tame and tether all this information so that someone could get a job. This mattered! I had to get it right!

It took a long time, a lot of anxiety, and then a very intense coaching session from a subject matter expert to get it even remotely right. And wow, I have to tell you, that hurt. My ego took a tumble, and my confidence that I'd ever get be able to do this was completely in ruins.

By now I **knew what I didn't know**, and there was so much more to it than I'd considered.

However, it can't have been too much of a disaster, because I got another one to do. This still took ages, but I was happier with the end result and it didn't require quite so much training. I did a few more, and realised that my note-taking had to be done in a different way - rather like mind-mapping or brain-storming a 'what if' - to enable me to write the CV more effectively with better examples. I also discovered that if I wrote the CV immediately after the phone interview rather than a few days later with the deadline looming, I could do it in half the time.

I was rewarded for my improvements with a more senior CV to write, and then

eventually, after many, many trials and even more errors, I fell into a more natural rhythm with the process, and even managed to contribute a little of my own style to the writing. Clients were starting to let me know that they'd got an interview. Part of my nature is a passion for developing people and encouraging them to follow their dreams (as you may have noticed!) so this gave me immense pleasure. Finally, I got my first executive CV to do for a CEO position. It took me a huge amount of time and effort, but the result was great and the feedback from all concerned was very flattering.

What stage was this? Correct: CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

I knew how much I did and didn't know, so I tested out various skills and new ways of doing things to come up with the best solutions for overcoming my challenges. I remembered some things about myself along the way, too - that I love helping people achieve their goals. Who'd have thought that writing a smart CV for someone could make me so happy? It was news to me, but the process had revived some latent part of myself. And of course, the more I loved it, the better the CVs became.

Now, I would hesitate to suggest that I ever reached the stage of UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE in CV writing. It's very involved, and I do still have to devote energy and time and careful thought to getting it right. But now my confidence in my ability to write them properly is high, bolstered by feedback from happy customers. I can take pleasure in helping them in reaching their life goals rather than just providing them with a supporting document. I don't ever question now that I know how to write a CV - I just head straight into it.

So the stage of nearly unconscious competence for me is what might be termed as **I know**. I don't stop to worry about it any longer; I just **AM** a CV writer.

However, if I was suddenly asked to write, say, a government white paper, I'd go straight back to unconscious incompetence, or perhaps conscious incompetence if I was lucky. If I was a character in a series, that might be where I would have to start each time a new book began.

So here's how it looks in character terms:

UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

They don't know what they don't know.

CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

They know what they didn't know

CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

They know what they do and don't know, and try out what they now know

UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

They just know. They are. It's part of them now.

What you will hopefully begin to recognise, too, is that each of these elements aligns rather nicely with the plotting technique we covered in the last chapter:

UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

They don't know what they don't know.

The beginning

CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

They know what they didn't know

The catalyst and perhaps upward slope of first peak

CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

They try out what they now know

The rest of the three peaks

UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

They just know. They are. It's part of them now.

The chimney and circular ending

If you match that against my rather prosaic tale of becoming a CV writer, it would look like this:

UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

They don't know what they don't know.

Taking on the role

CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

They know what they didn't know

First CV and editing. Ow!!

CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

They try out what they now know

Three peaks of more CVs, note-taking, and improving timing. More senior CVs

UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

They just know. They are. It's part of them now. .

EXEC CV! And remember how I love helping people achieve their goals

In this way, you can map out some of the challenges your character will face and how it will affect their development in a simple way, perhaps even jotting down a few key incidents and their meanings on your plotting diagram.

Excellent. Now you're getting a mental and perhaps a tangible image of your character's arc or development throughout the whole story. Literary novelists may find that their character dominates the writing process and that the link to plot is much gentler; genre fiction writers could discover that their characters are there to carry the plot along and their development may not be as important. Novelists writing children's books will probably find that it's an even split between character and plot, with the characters changing somewhat and the plot bouncing along in equal measure.

If you're a planner, this might help you to work out how each peak of activity will influence your hero's character development. If you're not a planner, just knowing so much about your characters and how they're going to be affected by events in their lives may well be enough to let you enable them to grow naturally throughout the telling of your tale. Of course, they might take over and tell you exactly how they're going to develop themselves!

Again, remember that you don't have to take every single one of your characters through this kind of arc. You'll end up exhausting yourself and the reader, and you've all got to keep going to the very, very end, when the character reaches nirvana, beats the enemy, satisfies those fans and readers ... Boy, it's tiring just *being* a character, never mind creating one, so make sure you don't tire yourself out with unnecessary conversions.

So there we have it. Wasn't that character building? Now we know who's populating your story. In the next chapter, we'll discover who is telling your story.

Go take the car out for a spin. You deserve a break. Oops ... watch that gatepost ...

SOMETHING TO TRY

Play around with a couple of letters in your own name and see what characters occur to you.

Draw a chart for your character or characters, listing out age, appearance, family arrangement etc

Consider how they'll develop from unconscious incompetence at the beginning of the book to unconscious competence at the end.

In your special writing notebook, take your character (or let another character take your character) up to the top of a tall building, and tell them to jump.

Summary

Your characters make up the ‘other’ element of your book, and are responsible for picking up and carrying the plotline.

Characters sometimes create themselves and appear full-formed in your imagination, telling you exactly how you describe them to readers. Others need to be created, built from the ground up.

Ways to create your character from scratch include jotting down notes about them, carrying out mock interviews with them, or filling in a character grid. You can do this for one or several characters.

Once you’ve created your character, they are going to have to go on a journey, possibly one of self-discovery rather than an actual trip. By the end of that journey (at the end of the book!) they will have changed to a greater or lesser degree. This is your character’s ‘arc’.

Characters mature from innocence or ignorance through to knowledgeable or powerful, moving from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence

If you are writing literary fiction, your book may be more character-led and the character development will be subtle; commercial fiction will be more plot-led, perhaps with more obvious or dramatic character changes or little development; children’s novels will tend to combine both equally

Chapter 5 Voice those fears

In the last chapter, we discussed your characters. Now we're going to elaborate on that by discussing who actually tells the story; in other words, which narrative voice are you using.

Each of your characters has a voice, and they are part of the narrative, so you might assume - not without good reason - that the narrative voice for your book comes from one or more of your characters. In a way it does, but actually, the narrative voice represents a different level of storytelling. Nor is to be wholly confused with your author's voice, which is more about your natural style, although to a degree it is dependent up on this. Narrative voice is really about the way the story is conveyed to the reader.

It's a very complex matter in literary terms. Whole books are devoted to it and it is the subject of much debate and definition. However, as an author, I've found that you only need to understand what you're doing and why, without necessarily having a deep insight into the use of narrative voice in literature which leads to all sorts of complications like unreliable narrators and the like. As writers, we need to understand the effect it has on the reader, not on literary critics around the world.

So it's important that you have a practical understanding of this issue of voice, and learn how to apply it appropriately. 'Practical' might sound straightforward, but I am warning you now - even at this level, it's complicated. People often struggle to get their head around the concept, and even when they understand it in an academic sense, they're still not sure how it applies to their own writing.

However, it's often at the stage when they do apply it to their own writing that authors reach a huge moment of enlightenment, when they realise they've finally got the voice right and suddenly the narrative begins to sing instead of mumble. You will make choices in this particular discipline of writing that can hit the mark exactly and make your story zing, or you can deaden the style in some way. You'll need to grasp this principle, experiment with this principle, and then make it your own. You'll be delighted by what transpires, I promise you, although it may feel like a slog along the way.

Bear with me, then, as we start to de-construct this technical issue of narrative voice, alongside of which sits the topic of the author's voice, and connected to which is the matter of tense. We'll break it down piece by piece and then you can put it back together again, firstly by reading and recognising it in other people's writing, and then by trialling it with your own work. And then I'm

sure that at least some of you will have a moment of illumination where the correct voice finds its way to you, or where you realise that you've been getting it right all along.

The common forms of narrative voice

You probably know two forms of narrative voice: first person and third person. First person is where the story is told from the point of view of 'I', and third person is where the point of view is 'he' or 'she'. Actually there are others, and I'll introduce you to them soon.

So far so good. As I said, you probably knew those voices. What the above paragraph does, however, is introduce a very important construct in 'narrative voice' and that is 'point of view'. Point of view (or POV, as it is often known) is much used in the film and TV worlds but is not so often connected with books and literature.

Well, here's my writerly advice for you: start using it.

A lot!

This little phrase will help you enormously to decide which voice you are in. More than that, it will identify whose *head* you are in. Whose *eyes* are we seeing this story through? Whose *ears* are listening to this conversation so that I, the reader, can hear it too? Whose language, moods, influences and opinions are we experiencing as we read the book?

Let's look at each of the narrative voice forms in terms of point of view. Or POV, if you will (it's just a lot easier to write).

First person

This one is perhaps the easiest to work out. The POV for the first person is ME. Well, not actually me as in Jill Marshall, but ME as in the main character of your book.

We are directly in the head of your main character, and learn about the whole of the story, the plot, the other characters, the main character's history (back story), the other characters' back story if the main character chooses to go into it ... and so on. Common identifiers of the first person voice are 'I', 'me', 'my' and 'mine'. You may rarely see the main character use their own name; it will mostly be used by other

people.

We are in the head of the main character who represents themselves as I. And we stay there.

Example A, First Person

I'd had enough of Budgers picking on me. It was time to do something about it. As long as I allowed her to get the better of me, I'd always be seen as a loser at the club. And I was desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, I followed her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' I called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' I said.

Second person

There you are, I told you there were other forms of narrative voice besides first and third. Maybe you saw this coming, or maybe you didn't. Anyway, I have just given you (oops, did it again) several clues as to how you (Ah! Again!) can spot the use of the second person.

Let me just run that past you again.

There **you** are, I told **you** there were others. Maybe **you** saw this coming, or maybe **you** didn't. Anyway, I have just given **you** (oops, did it again) several clues as to how **you** (**Agh! Again!**) can spot the use of the second person.

The second person, then, is where the author (me, Jill Marshall, your workshop facilitator) talks directly to you (the reader, client, novel writer). Every one of these chapters is written in the second person, because I'm communicating directly with you. As you can probably guess from this, the most common place to see the second person in use is in instructional books, teacher/student manuals, even self-help books - anywhere where the writer is imparting information directly to the person reading the book.

However, it does pop up from time to time in novels, especially in some children's

books.

Can you think where?

See, I just did it again. It's in those little questions that the author drops into the text to converse directly with the reader. And what do you think happened next, reader? Can you imagine what poor Eunice felt? Are you clever like Jane so you can count all the way up to ten? You know the kind of thing. They are probably more common in picture books for the under-fives (and that's because we're more likely to be *teaching* someone in an under-five book rather than purely entertaining them), but they do appear in some children's books like *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate di Camillo.

Sometimes the second voice shows up in the form of footnotes, where the author suddenly intervenes to explain a word or a fact or a snippet of back story. This the case in the Lemony Snicket series, where Lemony himself (an unreliable narrator, but let's not go into that) will write a long complex word that might be outside the reader's usual vocabulary, and then either put its meaning in brackets beside it or will direct the reader to the bottom of the page to read a footnote. Footnotes proliferate in the Jonathan Stroud books, *The Bartameus Trilogy*, where readers are often asked to leave what they're reading and check out some factoid below.

You may also find it in books which are contemporary but are deliberately written to come across as old-fashioned, because we do connect it with older literature. Jane Austen was particularly fond of inviting 'Dear Reader' to step back and consider the implications of her most recent piece of information, so stylistically, you can use this as a device to replicate the writing of another era.

There is nothing technically wrong with using the second person in this way, and if you've done it deliberately to re-create Austenesque images, then it will work to good effect. In general, however, what I find that it does to me as a reader is:

It distracts me from the story, and reminds me that I'm reading a book that somebody wrote (and here they, are shouting at me!). I'd much rather be immersed in the story to the extent that the writing and therefore the writer become completely invisible. I'm not the only one with this view, either. When I was reading such a tale to my daughter when she was about seven, after the fourth 'Dear Reader' interruption from the author she wrenched it out of my hands, yelling, 'Why does she keep doing that!' It's a

beautiful, award-winning book, and extremely interesting from the point of view of point of view and narrative voice, if you follow my drift. But that second person device is not for everyone.

It makes me feel a little patronised. I imagine that's what my daughter was experiencing when the author was at pains to make sure she understood exactly what was going on. 'I get it already!' was more or less what her 'dear reader' in the form of my seven year old was telling her. Of course, I am now aware of the irony of the fact that the whole of this online programme is written in the second person, so if you've felt patronised at any point on the course, I apologise sincerely.

It seems rather old-fashioned. I can forgive Jane Austen completely speaking directly to me in this fashion. She's my brilliant, witty friend. Moreover, she was writing two hundred years ago. These days, it feels rather out-of-place and anachronistic (*that means not belonging time-wise or in the wrong era, readers ... oh my lord, it's catching*).

As you'll probably have gathered, other than for teaching purposes, I am not a great fan of the second person. Cleverly used, it could give your book exactly the style and feel you want for it. The real author of Lemony Snicket used it for precisely that reason to create a sumptuous collection of dark, gothic novels, and if you're attempting to write Renaissance romance, for instance, you might also give it a go. My advice for you is to know why you're using it if you choose to do so, and use it sparingly.

Example B, second person

I'd had enough of Budgers picking on me. It was time to do something about it. As long as I allowed her to get the better of me, I'd always be seen as a loser at the club. And I was desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate.

(Hey, Reader, can you hear how sad poor Fredericks is?)

Later that night, I followed her through the shadows towards the gym (abbreviated version of Gymnasium, otherwise known as Sports Hall). 'Budgers,' I called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' I said.

Third person

The third person, as I'm sure you knew already, is still in the point of view of the main character as with the first person, but using 'he' or 'she' rather than 'I'. What you might not know, however, is that the third person can be divided into two different voice forms - third person *limited*, and third person *unlimited*. It is this distinction which causes the majority of the problems I see in the manuscripts I assess. Writers have generally known they're using the third person, and they've used it consistently throughout, but they may not have realised that they have unwittingly slipped from a third person limited voice to a third person Unlimited voice.

Let me explain.

Third Person Limited

This is fairly self-evident, really, so forgive me for stating the obvious: in the third person limited, we are limited to one person's view-point, and that person is a 'he' or a 'she'. That means that we are always in the head of that one person only. We only ever see the story through their eyes, using 'he' or 'she'. If they are not present at the event, if they don't hear or join in a conversation, if they don't experience it first-hand ... then we, the reader, do not know about it.

That doesn't mean that we can't understand the other characters too. Obviously we'll get some insight into what their personalities are like, what they're up to in plot terms - but only, absolutely only if the main character that you've chosen to tell the story is there too.

This is a lot more difficult to grasp than many people realise, so I find the easiest way to demonstrate what I mean is through the Harry Potter books (and I mean the books, not the films). The main character, clearly, is Harry Potter. It is entirely Harry's story. We know that Hermione and Ron are critical characters, as are many of the cast of thousands, but apart from the opening chapters in a few of the books (where we might find ourselves in Snape's house, or the office of the British Prime Minister), we only ever know what's going on in the story if Harry is there. Yes, we know that Hermione's clever and will quite often disappear to the library to unearth some legend and solve a mystery or two, but we don't follow her into the library unless Harry follows her too. We're all aware that Ron lives in a tumble-down house with many other red-haired children, but we never, ever go there unless Harry is going there too. If Harry's not present, or it isn't reported back to him after the fact, then it just doesn't happen.

The Harry Potter books are examples of a straight third person narrative (if we ignore one or two opening chapters). The third person limited voice, in the past tense, is the most common narrative voice for children's books up to about ten or eleven years old, and for adventures of the 'quest' variety. Much fantasy, science fiction and commercial adventure (eg Dan Brown) is written in the third person limited.

There are variations, naturally, but if you think of it as the classic storytelling voice, you'll recognise it instantly as the way stories have been handed down orally for many generations, so it makes story-telling much more simple. There's no confusion for the reader, and the narration of the story is tight and disciplined. It can be used without issue from age 0 to 100, so if that's the only voice you ever choose to use, you won't go far wrong.

The whole Jane Blonde series is in the third person limited - every single element of seven complex books is seen through Janey's eyes. You have to be very exacting about it, and remain consistently inside that character's head. Look through their eyes only. Listen through their ears only. Share their feelings more intimately than anyone else's, even though the reader can be aware of someone else's emotions too. Well, they can if your character is aware too.

What this means is that, if you're writing a romance, for instance, you can only know what your main character is feeling. I'm guessing the main character is a 'she'. The reader only gets to know what the male character is feeling if 'she' observes or overhears it. This is actually very helpful in plot terms, as she could overhear something she wasn't meant to and find herself getting the wrong end of the stick, which can lead to wonderful complications in the relationship.

In practical writing terms, strict use of the third person limited means that you would not say:

Beth felt her heart-rate speed up. This was the closest they'd ever been. 'What are you thinking?' she asked.

Bob was actually thinking that he'd rather be having a beer with David, but he smiled at her and said, 'That this is the perfect place to be.'

It's hard to spot, but hopefully you can see from this that we're in Beth's head and heart, and then we're in Bob's head. That is a no-no. That is UN limited. However, we can change it to limited with the addition of one simple word which puts it back into Beth's POV only. The word is *obviously*.

Beth felt her heart-rate speed up. This was the closest they'd ever been. 'What are you thinking?' she asked.

Bob was obviously thinking that he'd rather be having a beer with David, but he smiled at her and said, 'That this is the perfect place to be.'

We could use words like 'clearly' or 'evidently' or 'looked as though'; it won't matter which as long as we're seeing it through Beth's eyes, not jumping from Beth's POV to Bob's. As I said, it's a tiny subtle difference - one word, goddamit! - but it makes all the literary difference in the world.

Now, I know that many of you are thinking that you've read plenty of novels where the reader enters the head of more than one person. True. If you really want to get inside the head of one of the other characters, you can have more third person narratives. I do this myself in the Doghead novels (Doghead and Doghead Bites Back). One third person narrator is Jack Bootle Cadogan, and the other is Albie Cornthwaite.

David Nicholls uses two third person limited narratives in his best-selling novel, One Day - one for Dexter, and one for Emma. You might use three, although you do stand the risk of getting the voices and your reader mixed up and confused. I wouldn't suggest using any more than three - as we discovered in the plotting chapter, threes work well in writing terms, and any more can lose impact.

The trick to using multiple third person narrative voices is to keep each one to distinct sections, preferably chapters. In Doghead, for example, I have a chapter of Albie, then a chapter or two or sometimes three of Jack (who is the main character), then another chapter of Albie. You can do it chapter on, chapter off, if you like. If you really have to change voice within a chapter (and honestly, I've found very, very few examples where it's really necessary) then keep all one character's observations and activities strictly within one section, and then keep all the other character's observations and activities strictly within another section. Try to avoid having to go back and forth between sections, too; this gets exhausting for the reader, and again, it's probably very unlikely

that we really need to know what's going on in the head of each of those characters. You may just have been afraid to commit!

Example C, third person limited

He'd had enough of Budgers picking on him. It was time to do something about it. As long as he allowed her to get the better of him, he'd always be seen as a loser at the club. And he was desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, he followed her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' he called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' said Fredericks.

Third person unlimited

We talked in the third person limited about the importance of confining your third person limited voice to one section - a succinct and separate part of a chapter, if not a whole chapter, or even a section of a book like PART I. The third person unlimited is what happens when you don't keep your different voices discreetly within a section.

The third person unlimited means that we can zip into anyone's head and see the story from their perspective, or their neighbour's, or the cat's, and so it goes on ...

There are some upsides to this, in that the reader can more intimately understand any character's thoughts. If done deliberately and properly it can be very effective as a narrative device. However, it's rare that it's done deliberately, and in general the disadvantages of the third person unlimited far outweigh the advantages:

It's old-fashioned again. Dickens was fairly fond of writing in this way, but then he was effectively writing Victorian soap operas and serialising them week by week, so it's hardly surprising if we view it that way that the reader was given insights into many different characters. Coronation Street wouldn't be much fun either (for those who think it is!) if we only ever followed one character throughout. Mostly, however, the third person unlimited comes across as laboured and at times archaic.

It makes it difficult for the reader to form a close association with any character. You

may find they build alliances with the wrong ones! What's more likely, though, is that they won't empathise with any character especially well, and we know that readers like to relate to a character or aspire to follow in their shoes. If they don't, they'll lose interest in the story. Then the book. And then you the author, because they'll just assume that they don't like your style.

It makes it very long. We all know the Harry Potter books are long already; imagine how much longer they'd be if we followed Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Malfoy, Malfoy Senior, Snape, Voldemort and so on every time they disappeared off the page for a moment or two.

More often than not, the third person unlimited is NOT used deliberately, so the pattern the reader is trying to follow becomes ever more random. While the reader's just getting used to one person, the author decides to explain how the second character came to have popcorn in his ear, and suddenly, like a time-traveller, the reader has to swap bodies and try and gain some insight into this new person. Then - WHAM - we're back with the first character, and then hey, there's a third! The reader doesn't actually need to know anything other than what the main character is undergoing, but they're being forced to understand strange disassociated facts about the other personalities too. And because it isn't being done deliberately, the reader picks up on the uncertainty and starts to feel very uncomfortable about this reading experience. What's going on here? Why do I need to know that? What happened to ... (flick back several pages) ... Justin or whatever his name was? Then, guess what - they give up.

It will start to look like this:

Example D, third person unlimited

He'd had enough of Budgers picking on him. It was time to do something about it. As long as he allowed her to get the better of him, he'd always be seen as a loser at the club. And he was desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate. Like Graham; he'd been a really great captain.

Graham didn't think he was though. As he watched Fredericks playing in the distance, he thought about all the times he'd stuffed up. Why hadn't he stuck to ice hockey as a player instead of a captain? That way, Jenny would still have wanted to date him. Instead he never saw her because he was arranging all the stupid tables and leagues for everyone else.

Later that night, Fredericks followed Budgers through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' he called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. That idiot, Fredericks. She really enjoyed making him look like an idiot - bossed around and bullied by a female. He wasn't to know that she had an awful time at home, with Peter being a bit too fond of the whiskey, and then a bit too fond of smashing up the furniture. And she didn't want him to know. She didn't need anyone to know about what went on when nobody was watching.

'What, like you left your brain behind?' she said, rubbing her hands together with glee. She was going to get him. Totally GET him. 'It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' said Fredericks. Ha! He'd got her! She had no idea that he was going to turn the tables on her, that he'd been learning ju-jitsu for the last five months just in case this moment ever arose.

Neither of them realised that Graham was watching, and that behind him, the caretaker had started taking a keen interest in what was going on. The caretaker had been having a bad day - told off by the chief for leaving flammable rubbish in the bins. As if that was his problem. The members were out of control. Way out of control.

As you might imagine from this, we don't often see the third person unlimited in use. There are instances of it in *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne. If you read through, you'll find the thought process jumping from Bruno's head to that of Gretel, his sister's. Some time back I mentioned that once you know the rules, you can break them - my feeling is that this is one of those occasions. In fact, as a children's book, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* breaks many rules! However, as a contemporary example of the third person unlimited (and a very good book to de-construct as a writer) then it's well worth a read. And as a rule-breaker, which end of the literary-commercial spectrum does it sit? Indeed. Literary. It's sold a lot of copies and been turned into a film which is often considered 'commercial', but the book itself is definitely towards the other end of the spectrum.

Omniscient

The extreme extension of the third person unlimited voice is known as the Omniscient viewpoint, or sometimes the 'God' voice. It's as if the narrator is sitting up in the heavens, looking down on a landscape populated with many characters, and at any point they can jump from one character into the head of another, irrespective of distance or obstacles. The narrator is god of their universe, all-powerful, all-seeing - omniscient, and may occasionally tell you something that the other characters couldn't possibly know.

For example, I just mentioned that *One Day* is told in two third person limited narratives, one for Emma and one for Dexter. That's mostly true. However, now and again we find ourselves at a diversion, where author David Nicholls tells us something that neither Emma nor Dexter could have known. It comes at the end of a chapter, after one of the Dexter pieces like so:

Without further hesitation he packed the letter into an air-mail envelope and slipped it into his copy of Howards End, next to Emma's handwritten dedication. Then he headed off to the bar to meet his new Dutch friends.

Shortly after nine that night, Dexter left the bar with Renee van Houten, a trainee pharmacist from Rotterdam with fading henna on her hands, a jar of tempazepam in her pocket and a poorly executed tattoo of Weedy Woodpecker at the base of her spine. He could see the bird leering at him lewdly as he stumbled through the door.

In their eagerness to leave, Dexter and his new friend accidentally jostled Heidi Schindler, twenty three years old, a chemical engineering student from Cologne. Heidi swore at Dexter, but in German, and quietly enough for them not to hear. Pushing through the crowded bar, she shrugged off her immense back-pack and searched the room for somewhere to collapse.

Two things to note here - firstly, the fact that the word 'Shortly' is flush to the left hand margin shows us that a new section has begun because we have left Dexter's viewpoint behind. Secondly, we have jumped across to follow Heidi. To sum it up, she finds Dexter's copy of *Howards End*, and Emma's letter inside it, and this chapter ends with the following:

Heidi Schindler is Heidi Klauss now. Forty-one years old, she lives in a suburb of Frankfurt with a husband and four children, and is reasonably happy, certainly happier than she expected to be at twenty-three. The paperback copy of Howards End is still on the shelf in the spare bedroom, forgotten and unread, with the letter tucked neatly inside the cover, next to an inscription in small, careful handwriting.

Not only have we jumped from Dexter to Heidi, we have followed Heidi to Germany and caught up with her eighteen years later, courtesy of the author who is the omniscient creature who knows all this. It's a literary device, as there's really no need for Heidi other than to remind us of the letter that Emma wrote for Dexter, that he left behind in

a gift Emma had hoped he'd treasure. Nicholls could have just left the letter lying on the floor and let us read it ourselves, but he chose to follow it through in this way.

It's clever, and that's the point to remember. Nicholls' first novel, *Starter for Ten*, is much simpler and told from one point of view only. By this stage, the author is stretching himself and playing with the form. If you're ready for it and you want to give it a try because it's right for your book, then by all means give it a go, but otherwise avoid this until you're completely ready.

Mixing it up

You might not be ready to be all-knowing, but you could be ready to have a more complex narrator structure for your novel. Great! Just remember that whenever you switch to a different POV, aim to change chapters, or at least create a new section as in the example above.

In my adult novels, I have two **first person narratives** in *The Two Miss Parsons*, one from Cally who is the mother figure, and one in the form of texts and emails from her daughter, Paige.

In *As It Is On Telly* I used a straight **third person limited narrative**, but then every so often threw in a short **first person section**, again in the form of emails.

In *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*, I challenged myself a little more and used **two first person and one third person limited narratives**, using each for a few chapters, and then now and again I would have a tiny 'omniscient' piece which would be a news article.

To do this successfully, you have to work out which voice suits your character and your story best. First person is often direct and personal, and possibly even diarised, so often this works well for women's fiction/chick lit as in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Third person limited can feel more distant from the character and, as we know, is the classic story-telling voice, so it's great for adventure, action, crime and thrillers and so on. If you're changing between them you can have both styles in the same novel, one more sentimental and one more action-based.

A lovely example is teen novel *The Snog Log* by Michael Lawrence, where the 'boy'

version of the quest to get as many kisses in one term as possible is told in the third person limited, and then the girl's side of the story, about how that makes her feel, is told in the first person, diary style. Try a few for size and see which suits - and don't feel you have anything to prove by over-complicating matters! When in doubt, use third person limited. It's always a safe haven.

Tense

Now that we're starting to get a handle on narrative voice, this seems like a good time to introduce the issue of tense - a very good time indeed, as tense is all to do with time, and whether something is happening now, or happening in the past.

The tenses we usually use are present or past. There are other more complex permutations in grammatical terms, but we'll just stick to those two.

Present is happening now, and can be identified with endings of 'e', 'ings' and 's' if you're looking for an easy way to spot it:

Eg I am going to the counter when I notice the shop assistant reeks of perfume. I know that perfume - it's the one my aunt wears.

Eg 2 He steps out into the road just as the car screeches to a halt. For a moment he thinks it's too late, and he almost hops out of the way. But then he remembers his new powers, and before he can think too hard about it, he pushes down onto the balls of his feet and takes off, bouncing up and over the car.

Past tense happened in the past, and is identified by 'd' or 'ed' endings.

Eg 3 I was going to the counter when I noticed the shop assistant reeked of perfume. I knew that perfume - it was the one my aunt wore.

Eg 4 He stepped out into the road just as the car screeched to a halt. For a moment he thought it was too late, and he almost hopped out of the way. But then he remembered his new powers, and before he could think too hard about it, he pushed down onto the balls of his feet and takes off, bouncing up and over the car.

Right. Now I'd like you to go back over these few examples, and read each one of them

aloud. Reading aloud can make a real difference to how it feels, and your sense of atmosphere. Which combinations sounded better?

While there are no hard and fast rules for this, the general findings are that first person and present tense can work really well as a combination. It has a raw quality, a certain immediacy that can lend itself well to a stream of consciousness, diary-type book that delves into people's feelings.

Third person and past tense also works well, as it has a traditional, solid foundation that many readers are used to and can be applied really well to adventures, quests, mysteries, and more action-based books.

But as mentioned, any combination can be used to great effect. Try reading the first of the Budger/Fredericks episodes in the past tense.

Example A, First Person

I'd had enough of Budgers picking on me. It was time to do something about it. As long as I allowed her to get the better of me, I'd always be seen as a loser at the club. And I was desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, I followed her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' I called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' I said.

Example A, was in first person past tense, so here it's changed to first person present tense.

I've had enough of Budgers picking on me. It's time to do something about it. As long as I allow her to get the better of me, I'll always be seen as a loser at the club. And I am desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, I follow her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' I call. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggers. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' I say.

Let's do the same with the third person limited example.

Example C, third person limited

He'd had enough of Budgers picking on him. It was time to do something about it. As long as he allowed her to get the better of him, he'd always be seen as a loser at the club. And he was desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, he followed her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' he called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' said Fredericks.

Example C, was third person limited past tense, changed to third person limited present tense

He's had enough of Budgers picking on him. It's time to do something about it. As long as he allows her to get the better of him, he'll always be seen as a loser at the club. And he's desperate to be Club Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, he follows her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' he calls. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggers. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' says Fredericks.

Which do you prefer? You may have found that you liked the immediacy of the present tense with the first person, or it may have sounded better with the third person. It's really up to you; you can have any permutation you like.

I really do advise reading it out loud. That way you'll start to be able to gauge that physical reaction I told you about in the early chapters. One will sound completely right, while another might change the age of the reader, turn the tone and style of it into something else (which you may even find you prefer! That's okay - go with your gut).

I've just read both these pairs aloud, and even though it's not the more usual

combination of third person past tense, I feel as though the second version of example C works well (third person limited present tense) as it has a real sense of threat around it. It's very much darker than any of the other versions - do you hear that too?

It's a lot of fun to try a few paragraphs of your writing in different combinations, because as we've said all along, once you know all the rules, you may break them! In my new series, *Matilda Peppercorn*, I use the first person with the past tense, as she's a lovely mad girl whose thoughts are fun to hear, but it's very adventuresome with a traditional 'story' structure (rather than, say, a diary or journal) so the past tense works with that element of it. Both of *Doghead's* third person limited narrators are combined with the past tense, because that seemed to work for their characters; *Jane Blonde* has a classic third person past tense voice.

Where it got to be really good practice was trying to find the right combinations for *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*. As I've mentioned, I had already decided on two first person and one third person limited narratives. They were all past tense, and belonged in turn to Clare, a slightly bitter woman in her forties, Abby, a pole dancer in her twenties, and Jo, a fun and flighty mature student in her thirties.

I wrote the whole book in this vein, and had actually already sent it off to my publishers when I realised I should try something different. I took the voice of Abby, in her twenties, and changed it from the past to the present tense so that her chapters were all in first person present tense. The difference it made was staggering. She instantly sprang to life, simultaneously harder and yet more vulnerable. She also became a young woman in her twenties - just like that, and just by changing the tense.

It worked better overall too, as what I then had was:

Clare, 40s, first person past tense

Jo, 30s, third person limited past tense

Abby, 20s, first person present tense.

This created three distinct voices, so that even if the reader hadn't seen the chapter heading indicating whose chapter it was, they would know from the voice.

For all of these changes, I did a lot - and I mean a LOT - of reading aloud to make sure it

was all gelling together and making the hairs on my arms stand on end. Yes, really.

Author's voice

So this is where the next stage comes in. Not only do you have to identify the various narrative voices depending on whose point of view it is in, and then have to add in the additional factor of which tense to combine it with, but you also have to work out what your authentic author's voice is. By this, I don't mean the author's commentary which pokes through at the reader when you use the second voice, but the style in which you are most comfortable, in which your authentic voice comes through.

Many, many new writers of my acquaintance start out thinking they want to write adult novels, but actually their authentic voice is for teens. Or people will tell me they want to write something clever and beautiful (literary) when actually their authentic voice lies in adult vampire historical fiction (eg steam-punk, for those who might want to know).

In my case, many people assume that I wrote Jane Blonde for my daughter. However, my daughter was two when I first thought of Jane Blonde, and four or so when I first started writing about Jane Blonde, and still younger than Jane Blonde herself when the first book was published. Apart from the inspiration of her hair colour, the Jane Blonde series was never written because of my daughter.

It was written for me, at exactly the age I was when you could not tear me away from a good book, or even a bad book; when reading was what I lived for; when I forced my poor mother to trail for miles up and down to the library, hauling a shopping trolley stuffed with books to feed my addiction. And how old was I then? About ten. Between nine and eleven years old. Right in the middle of that 8 - 12 age bracket that Jane Blonde is known to reside in. When Jane Blonde came along, I wrote her for the Me that would have loved her. That's the age I've stuck with, too, for the most part, because it reverberates within me like a tuning fork.

Finally, some tips for making sure you get your narrative voice and tense as right as right can be:

Choose one, and stick to it. One voice and stick to it, one tense and stick to it -

unless you alter it by moving into a new section, which should probably be a new chapter if you can manage it. Until you are a much practiced writer, don't try playing with the form as it will make your writing seem less experienced rather than more.

Find your style, and work with it. Even if you've always wanted to write to impress your former English professor, if your authentic voice is actually for fantasy, then go with it. Your writing will be much the better for it, and both you and your readers will enjoy the experience more. When you've mastered all that needs to be known about narrative voice and tense for fantasy writing, then you can adapt your style for literary - which could mean going from third person past tense to first person present tense. But you knew that. There I go, getting all Second Person on you again.

Don't worry about dialogue. You might feel when you're getting into dialogue that you were writing in the third person past tense and now you're suddenly in the first person and the present tense. Don't over-think it. It's like rock bands on tour - what happens between the speech marks *stays* between the speech marks. It's only the 'he said's' and 'I say's' that matter. If you're still not convinced, read through examples A - D in this chapter about Budgers and Fredericks, and then, if you like, the rewritten versions where you've changed the tense. The words between the speech marks never change, not matter what voice or tense you are in. Just the 'he said's' and the 'I say's'.

If you want to practice identifying voice and tense, you might like to get hold of a copy of *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell. There's every combination under the sun in there, masterfully done. Don't try reading that one aloud, unless you have weeks to spare and the trained vocal muscles of a Shakespearian actor. And don't watch the film instead; you need to see it written down.

Wow, I've made you earn your stripes in this chapter! But it really is a sign of growing maturity as a writer, to be able to understand and select your narrative voice and tense, and stick to them appropriately. Well done.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Close your eyes. Drop yourself back into your childhood. Recall an event that had some impact in your life, either positively or negatively. Let it roll around your head for five minutes or so, as you remember how you felt at the time. What was going through your head? What could you hear/smell/touch/sense? How old were you? Now write that episode down.

Now note which voice you've used, and which tense. Then re-write your passage, changing both voice and tense. For example, if you wrote it in the first person past tense, try it in the third person present tense.

Great. You may have found that quite a challenge! But it's a very worthwhile exercise, because now I'd like you to read both of the pieces *aloud*, and then note down below the way it made you react.

You can use any comparators that you like (older/younger, harsher/softer, stronger/weaker), but you'll definitely get a feel for one over the other according to your own important criteria. Reviewing the above, which do you think is your authentic author's voice (even if it's just for this piece)?

Brilliant. Now you're well on the way to establishing a voice which works for you as well as working for the book.

Summary

Narrative voice is the device by which the story is conveyed to the reader, and is defined by whose point of view we see the story through. It is one of the most powerful techniques to employ to enhance your story.

While there are two commonly known forms of narrative voice - first person and third person - there is also a second person voice, and the third person voice is divided into two different voices.

The third person can be either limited (only seen through one person's eyes) or unlimited (seen through the POV of many different characters). The extreme version of the unlimited third person voice is sometimes known as the omniscient or God voice.

The topic of tense is also commonly connected with voice, and some more standard combinations are third person limited and past tense, and first person and present tense. Any combination can be used as long as it's used consistently.

The most common mistake new writers make is changing POV in the middle of a sentence, paragraph, section or chapter - usually in dialogue when we can suddenly hear what each character is thinking or feeling. If you have to change, do it by opening a new section, or better yet, a new chapter.

Chapter 6 Showtime

Now that your book's taking shape, it's all these matters of technique in writing such as narrative voice that will begin to make your manuscript ring true and shine through. When I'm assessing a manuscript, I can quickly see how practiced and experienced someone is at writing - and therefore how much closer to publication, if that's what they're aiming for - by how much they have mastered this technical side of the craft.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the topic that we're about to discuss in this chapter. Besides authors and film-makers, not many people are even aware of the existence of this particular discipline, and that's either because the writer got it right in the first place, or any transgressions have been edited out of the finished article. Done properly, this technique allows your writing to become invisible, to sink into the background so that your reader is only aware of the story unfolding and the characters journeying.

This technique is known as 'show not tell'. You 'show' your story to the reader so that they can experience it for themselves, rather than telling them what's happened as if you're reporting it after the fact like a police report or piece of journalism. You involve the reader to the extent that you have to describe very little in order for them to know exactly what's going on, and precisely how your character is feeling (which will be the way your reader is feeling too). You guide their senses gently and appropriately, without troweling on mounds of information about what should be assaulting their ears, noses, hearts, feet ...

As with narrative voice, the best way to become familiar with what is showing rather than telling is to learn to recognise it on the page. This is made rather difficult by the fact that, as mentioned above, most published books have been edited so that all we see is what's 'shown'. To that end, I'll take you through some examples so that you can identify telling and showing for yourself, and then can go back and recognise it in your own work.

Here's an example of an incident that is 'told' rather than shown.

Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as the teacher had instructed him. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself. She said that she didn't imagine he knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.

The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, Mr Peters read out a long list of wrong-doings that Benny had carried out that morning.

The list included the fact that he'd been late for the third time that week, and then he'd forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he'd given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

Benny tried to explain that he'd been late because he was putting a baby bird back into its nest, and that he hadn't forgotten to take the register but was going to suggest a new way of taking it which would involve doing it by computer. Then he tried telling Mr Peters that he didn't have peanut butter on his sandwiches. Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

Indicators of 'telling'

To the trained eye, there are a number of pieces of evidence that instantly suggest 'telling' rather than showing in this piece of writing.

Dense text

This is just a quick visual test. When the text is very heavy on the page and there isn't much visible white space, it's often a sign that there's a big chunk of 'telling' going on. It's not always true, of course, and sometimes you will need to 'tell' some of your story, but if much of your writing looks like this at first glance, then the chances are you need

to 'show' at least some of it.

After the fact

All of Benny's activities are being reported *after they've happened*. This is what makes it look like journalism rather than fiction. You can see it in the overuse of the past tense, and the fact that there is little or no detail in any of the events.

In fact, when I'm coaching journalists in the process of writing fiction, they often have difficulty in expanding their wordcount - what I call 'writing long'. They are trained to cut back words at all time, to focus only on the relevant, editing as much as they create. You still need careful editing, of course, but the joy of fiction is the way the words create new worlds for the reader, and it's hard to do that with a reporting style.

What I often write on manuscripts where this has happened is 'Put it on the page', by which I mean put it down as it's happening, rather than telling the reader about it after it's all gone by. There are several events in this excerpt - lateness, the lost register, ballooning George, headmaster's office and so on - and we learn about them all well after they have occurred. Put it on the page for all to see, and you will suddenly find yourself 'writing long'. This particular piece could easily be a few pages, if not a whole chapter.

Reported speech

There is no dialogue in this piece of writing, even though we know that people have been communicating verbally. How do we know this? Because we are *told*. The author even uses the word 'told' on several occasions to indicate that the speech is reported rather than direct dialogue.

Take another look at the first couple of paragraphs; I've highlighted the reported speech for you.

Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as the teacher had instructed him. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself. She said that she didn't imagine he

knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.

The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, Mr Peters read out a long list of wrong-doings that Benny had carried out that morning.

While there's nothing technically wrong with reported speech and it is fine to use it from time to time, I hope you can see that the effect here is to deaden the conversation and make the whole episode much flatter.

Over-explanation

Because we're not sharing in Benny's experiences, the author has to tell the reader how he's feeling and what he's thinking, and this often leads to over-egging the explanation: Benny sat nervously ... felt silly ... was uncomfortable because of his thin legs. None of these is incorrect, but there would be better ways to say them so that the reader knows without being told how Benny is feeling.

There's also a tendency to over-write by using adverbs where none are necessary, and exclamation marks and the like where none are needed, for example, in the sentence:

Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

There's really no way to shout other than loudly, so that adverb is redundant, and the exclamation mark would be unnecessary if this was 'shown' in dialogue instead of reported speech.

So there we have it: a few instant alarm bells for a piece of writing which is telling rather than showing. It's not all that bad as a bit of story-telling goes, and there's not a single thing in it that's actually incorrect, but it could be so much better. And that 'so much better' is what you're aiming for to really polish up your writing and entice those readers (and publishers).

Learning how to spot a sneaky instance of 'telling' not 'showing' is just the beginning. It would now be helpful to discover what to do about it - how to turn it around so it's more

show than tell.

I suggested earlier that a first indication of ‘telling’ could be the fact that the text looks dense. In other words, it’s heavy. When you show rather than tell you are making the text lighter. The story bounces like a helium-filled balloon, the conversation trips along, and the effect on the page is to penetrate that dark, heavy text and add some levity to the proceedings. Note that this does not mean you need to make it humorous, although that might be one of the results if you would like it to be. You are just making it easier to read, and for the reader to be in the story themselves rather than hearing it second-hand.

I have a mnemonic that I use to remember how to keep our writing light and fresh, like the meal it represents - SALAD. As if I were indeed assembling a salad, I’ll take each ingredient one by one, then we’ll apply it to our Benny example so that you can see it working in practice.

Salad

The first ‘S’ is for ... SUBTLETY

This relates to the tendency to over-describe, or what Monty Python might have referred to as ‘stating the bleeding obvious.’ Use concrete images that evoke powerful memories for the reader by all means, but use senses other than sight, emotions other than the immediate, and do it all without ever saying what you’re talking about - so not:

He was disappointed with his inappropriate birthday presents from Gran.

but rather

*The sickly scent of vanilla seeping through the wrapping paper turned his stomach.
Whoever thought bath salts were a good present for a seventeen year old guy? Gran,
that was who.*

Can you see the difference here? For a start, it’s visually different - it’s longer, with three sentences where previously one had sufficed. Then there is no statement of his feelings; rather than a bald indication of his disappointment, we share the experience of

the physical reaction that the smell of the bath salts has on him. Furthermore, we can almost see him opening the present and trying not to reel with repulsion, whereas in the first example the opening of the presents could have happened at any time in the recent past.

The requirement for subtlety extends to the use of adverbs and too many adjectives. In school, children are often taught to find three beautiful words to describe a flower, a butterfly, the weather ... In book-writing, however, the opposite is true. Less is definitely more. You don't have to pare your language back to the degree that there's not a single descriptive word in the whole manuscript, but keep the flowery on the down-low. This is especially true of adverbs (shouting loudly is back to 'stating the bleeding obvious', as is running quickly, crawling slowly, jumping bouncily and so on).

It's even more important for words used in dialogue as substitutes for 'said'. Nothing signals 'NEW WRITER HERE' more than someone who constantly checks the thesaurus for new ways to say 'asked', 'said' and 'replied'. You could just use 'said' in all instances, in fact, so please do avoid the temptation to use any of the following more than once in any book: he postulated, she queried, he questioned, she parried, I countered, he reprimanded, he summaried (this isn't even a word, but I see it often!).

Let's take a look at a section of the Benny story that isn't particularly subtle.

Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

Here are some pieces of evidence that this is 'told' rather than 'shown':

There are several instances of the reader being told how someone is feeling, including Benny and the principal;

'Terrified' is already an extreme emotion - it doesn't need the additional 'extremely';

The fact that his father is always very strict is mentioned as a sort of after-thought. What examples do we have? How could we, the reader, share that terror?

Here's how I might have re-written it:

Benny's cheeks burned as Mr Peters closed the door on him with a shake of his balding head. Alone in the draughty reception area, he wondered just how much worse this day could get. Then he remembered. So much worse. His backside had hardly recovered from the last beating his father had given him, and that was just for failing to put the rubbish out "properly". He wouldn't be able to sit for a week when Dad heard about his latest escapades. Grabbing his knees to stop them from shaking, Benny watched the clock. Five minutes to his doom. Three minutes. One.

sAlad

The first 'A' in SALAD stands for ... Action on the page

A is for action, which means making your verbs active rather than passive to make your language more powerful (so rather than 'She **was pushed** to the end of the gangplank by Pirate Pat' you would say 'Pirate Pat **pushed her** to the end of the gangplank). Then make your active verbs even more action-oriented (eg 'Pirate Pat shoved/forced/cattle-prodded her to the end of the gangplank). Just read these two aloud and hear how much more action and urgency there is in the second version:

She was pushed to the end of the gangplank by Pirate Pat.
Pirate Pat shoved her to the end of the gangplank.

Then, not only do your verbs need to be active not passive, and action-oriented not ordinary, but the action has to be there on the page for the reader to see. As I mentioned before, put it on the page as it's happening, rather than commenting on it afterwards.

Here's a section of Benny's story that relates the events after they've happened.

Benny tried to explain that he'd been late because he was putting a baby bird back into its nest, and that he hadn't forgotten to take the register but was going to suggest a new way of taking it which would involve doing it by computer. Then he tried telling Mr Peters that he didn't have peanut butter on his sandwiches. Instead it was almond

butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

As you can see, there are three different events collapsed into this one small paragraph. What a shame, when they all sound quite exciting! In fact, each one gets more exciting than the last, rather like our three little pigs plotting technique. It would be far more fun for the reader to travel along with Benny while he rescues birds, invents new ways to take the roll-call in the morning, and accidentally causes his friend's head to swell up.

The morning began uneventfully enough. Breakfast - Weetbix. Dishwasher - locked and loaded. Backpack - packed on back. Benny set off for school, organised and feeling just a little smug that he was going to be On Time for once.

He scuffed along the street, kicking stones into the gutter, considering his grand plan for computerisation of the school roll-call. He'd win the Science Fair, possibly even the national finals. Benny was just lining up a crack gutter-shot when the pebble near his toe twitched.

'No way.' Dropping to his knees, Benny sized up the small grey mass. A tiny black eye gazed back at him. It was the tiniest baby bird Benny had ever seen with feathers. How it had survived so far he had no idea, but it was definitely not going to be his fault if the poor thing carked it now.

The nest took some time to locate, and Benny wasn't even sure he'd found the right one. He popped the baby bird into it anyway. 'Cuckoos are always doing this,' he said to the bird in what he hoped was a bird-like reassuring tone. 'You'll be fine.'

The black eye blinked back at him as Benny launched himself out of the tree. Darn. That was the school bell. Picking up the pace, Benny set off at a trot, skidding into the classroom just as Miss Masterton called out the last name on the class roll. She stared at Benny, then shook her head. 'Okay, Burton. Black mark for absence, and you can take the register to the office and explain to the school secretary.'

'Right,' said Benny with a sigh. Then, *'Right!'* he said more cheerfully.

This was the perfect opportunity. He could substitute his computer programme for the morning's roll-call, and WOW the school secretary with it. Then she'd sell it on to all the teachers and the head for him. Job done, Science Fair won. He tucked the book in carefully beside his illegal lap-top, and settled in besides George for maths extension class.

Maths always took it out of George. At morning tea, he lay panting on the

tarmac, like Bear Grills after a mountain mission. 'Water ... give me water,' he gasped. Benny handed over his flask, even though it had orange juice in it, and added a sandwich for good measure. George tore at the soggy bread as if he'd been starving in the Serengeti. 'More!' he said, practically swallowing the thing whole. Then he turned to Benny in surprise. 'Ny hong,' he said, pointing at his mouth.

George's tongue was swelling like a snake that had just swallowed a rabbit, and both cheeks had turned scarlet. He held up the sandwich crust accusingly. 'Ea nut?' he said.

'No, almond,' said Benny. 'Honestly, it's almond. People don't get allergies to almonds.'

Then George screamed something at him which Benny translated as, 'I think I do, you moron,' at just the same moment that his friend keeled over and hit the tarmac all over again. Only this time, George appeared to be unconscious.

Just by putting the action on the page, we've immediately expanded the story, taking each incident and turning it into a 'scene' rather than a related event. This has the obvious effect of making the story longer, but it also takes the reader by the hand and leads them along in Benny's footsteps. Without having to 'tell' the reader anything, we know that Benny gets himself up in the morning, that he's often late, that he has mad ideas, that he's kind to injured animals, that he's good at maths, that he wants to win the Science Fair for some reason, that his best friend is George, that George is allergic to peanuts and so on. The reader should be receiving a far more satisfying experience, sharing all Benny's discoveries and dreadful shocks with him directly instead of being removed from the action by the author intervening and 'telling' the story

saLad.

The L in SALAD is for ... layering

We discussed the need to layer in information in the chapter on Character, because it's often with the introduction of a character that we suddenly find ourselves wading through a boggy patch of telling. A new character pops up on the page, followed by several more pages of minutiae about the individual. It's better to feed in the details by introducing nuggets of information at relevant points throughout the whole of the story, instead of dishing it all up at the beginning.

Subtle layering assists you with your plotting as well, as it can often lead to a marvelous exposition or ‘aha’ moment at the climax of the book when the reader discovers what that tiny piece of knowledge they had about their character actually meant. If you’ve dished it all out the moment you introduced your new character (or plot strand, sub-plot or setting) then you’re not going to have anything left to reveal at the right moment.

Here’s a section of our Benny story that isn’t layered at all - it’s all served up for the reader in an unwieldy chunk.

The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, Mr Peters read out a long list of wrong-doings that Benny had carried out that morning.

The list included the fact that he’d been late for the third time that week, and then he’d forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he’d given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

You may have identified the fact that Mr Peters is just introduced quickly to the reader, rather than the reader finding out what he’s called by some other means (probably Benny). Then we get the long list of misdemeanours all at the same time. There is actually a tiny layering effect that gives us some idea of what Mr Peters and Benny are like - where the head makes Benny sit on the hardest chair - but that section is like the delicate filling sandwiched between bread that’s too thick and doughy to enjoy.

Here’s my take on a more layered version:

‘You again?’ The principal threw open his door with a bang and nodded towards the Chair of Evil. ‘Sit down, Burton.’

‘There?’

‘Yes. There.’

Benny sat down with a wince. There was a school myth that Mr Peters had created the chair himself to torture school-kids without being noticed. Nails stuck out of it at odd angles, and unless you perched on the edge of it and sat up ram-rod straight, it creaked like a Scooby Doo house so that Peters could snap at you to shut up.

Peters bared his yellow teeth at Benny as he struggled to find his balance. It

was meant to be a smile. 'You have been busy, haven't you?'

'Sir?'

'At least, I assume you've been busy,' said Peters, staring down at a long list of scribble on his desk. 'So busy you can't get to school on time.'

'No, well, yes, but you see there was a bird that had fallen out of its nest, and ...'

The principal held up a scrawny hand. 'Yes, I'm sure it needed rescuing. The same as the class register, I presume. You do know that the whole school office was searching for that thing for hours. Miss Mays couldn't believe we had a whole class that was absent. And then I thought ... hmm, who might have failed to deliver the register to the office? Do you know what name I came up with, Burton?'

'Mine, sir?'

Mr Peters gave him a thumbs up. 'Yours, Burton.'

'I was going to suggest a new way of doing it, but then George sort of exploded on the playground and it went out of my head,' said Benny. 'Sir,' he added as an afterthought.

'Ah, yes - George. He's supposed to be your best friend. Gone off him, have we?'

Benny stared. George was brilliant. Without George there would be no point to his life at all. 'No ...' he said slowly. 'I haven't gone off him.'

'Then why,' said the principal, thrusting his face into Benny's so that he had to lean back on the Chair of Evil and make it screech, 'would you try to kill him?'

Ah. The peanut allergy thing. 'It was almond butter, sir,' shouted Benny. Not that there was much point in saying anything at all. Even with Benny yelling, Peters wasn't listening. The verdict was already decided.

'Save it for your father,' said Mr Peters, waving at the door. 'He'll be here in ten minutes to chastise you. I mean, collect you.'

Dismissed and in even bigger trouble than he could ever remember, Benny trailed outside to Reception.

salAd

The second A in SALAD is for ... As it happens

The major problem with 'telling' is that it reports everything after the fact. It has already happened, and the author is relating it to the reader retrospectively. Writing it 'as it happens' means quite simply that you put it down on the page in the order in

which everything occurred.

There's often a tendency for authors, particularly visual writers who see the story unfolding in their imagination as if they're watching a film, to write the book in a filmic fashion. They open with a scene and then back-fill the story, in the same way as it might unfold if it were being viewed on a screen. It's okay to do this once or twice in a book, perhaps when you're starting a new chapter, but remember that it's far better to put the action down sequentially, as it happens, in the time order in which it occurs (unless you've deliberately put in a flash-back or fore-shadowing).

Take another look at the old version of Benny's story.

Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as the teacher had instructed him. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself. She said that she didn't imagine he knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.

The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, Mr Peters read out a long list of wrong-doings that Benny had carried out that morning.

The list included the fact that he'd been late for the third time that week, and then he'd forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he'd given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

Benny tried to explain that he'd been late because he was putting a baby bird back into its nest, and that he hadn't forgotten to take the register but was going to suggest a new way of taking it which would involve doing it by computer. Then he tried telling Mr Peters that he didn't have peanut butter on his sandwiches. Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

Here we find Benny sitting outside the principal's office at 11.30am, waiting to be told off for a number of things. It's like an opening scene in a film or TV series, and then the events of the morning are related after the fact. But what is the *actual* order in which these events occur?

Well, first of all Benny gets up, leaves home, finds a bird. Then he goes into school, puts the register in his bag, and goes to maths. Next he goes outside with George and inadvertently poisons him. Presumably after that the teacher gets involved and tells Benny to go and see the principal at 11.30am. Then he goes to the office and gets his telling off, and finally has to wait outside for his father to come and roast him.

If we put the action on the page in the order it happens, we'll be travelling through the story with Benny in real time. There will be no need for flashbacks, loops in time, odd coincidences and the like, which will not only make it a more straightforward read for the child audience, but will 'show' the story to them in a far more satisfactory manner that allows them to get involved.

And finally ... salaD

The D in SALAD is for ... Dialogue

You will have noticed by now that reported speech does not look like dialogue on the page. As a result the text appears dense, and the sparkle of the conversation is lost. If you look at a page of a book with dialogue on it, there will be more white space on the page and the overall appearance will be much more appealing. Books at the literary end of the spectrum may have less white space on the page as they tend to contain more description. That might be a quick reference for you: how much white space is there on the page, and does that fit my novel?

Bear in mind that you don't want pages and pages of dialogue either. That's a script or a screenplay. A mix of dialogue and narrative is probably best. As I've been re-writing the Benny pieces, I've been adding in more dialogue as I go along, partly to show what Benny and the other characters are like in a subtle fashion, and partly to liven up the narrative. The one section that I haven't added dialogue into is this one:

Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as the teacher had instructed him. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself. She said that she didn't imagine he knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.

You will probably have identified the dialogue between the secretary and Benny, and there's also another conversation earlier, where the teacher tells Benny he has to go to the principal's office at 11.30am.

Here's my attempt at it with dialogue, subtlety and layering.

Miss Masterton stared at Benny over George's prone body.

'This is the last straw, Benny Burton,' she said, wiggling the lolly stick she was using to hold George's tongue down to stop him choking himself. 'I want you to see George into the ambulance, as for some insane reason he seems to like you, and then go to Mr Peter's office at 11.30am.'

Benny gulped. This was not looking good. 'I could take over tongue duty if you like, Miss,' he said.

'Ambulance. Mr Peters. That's it.' Miss Masterton spat the words out so hard that Benny worried poor George would get wet.

He checked as George was trolleyed into the ambulance. All dry. Not very well, but dry. 'See you later, mate,' he whispered, but George just glared at him. At least he was alive enough to do that.

There was nothing else for it but to head up to the principal's office. He popped his head around the door and attempted a cheery grin. 'Hello, Miss Mays.'

The secretary glanced up from her filing. 'Ah, yes,' she said, as if that explained everything. 'The Principal's not here yet.'

'I'll come back,' said Benny.

'No, you won't. You'll sit down and wait here where I can see you. And at least try to sit still, though I don't suppose a fidget like you knows how.'

Benny smothered another sigh as he sat down. Even the school secretary had unfair opinions about him. This day was going from bad to worse.

Putting it all together

You've now been introduced to the whole of SALAD, which is a guide to showing not telling. Just to recap, and show you the whole of SALAD at once, here is the mnemonic in its entirety:

S is for Subtlety
A is for Action on the page
L is for Layering
A is for As it happens
D is for Dialogue

The emphasis is on keeping it light, keeping it in order, keeping it moving, and keeping the reader involved. Let's now put together the Benny story in SALAD fashion. Remember what it looked like when it was 'told'.

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The list included the fact that he'd been late for the third time that week, and then he'd forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he'd given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

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Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what

his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

Now here's how it might look with 'showing not telling'. I've added in some tiny links to ensure that it flows properly, but otherwise this is the different sections of SALAD, pieced together so that action is on the page, as it happens, with dialogue, layering and subtlety.

The morning began uneventfully enough. Breakfast - Weetbix. Dishwasher - locked and loaded. Backpack - packed on back. Benny set off for school, organised and feeling just a little smug that he was going to be On Time for once.

He scuffed along the street, kicking stones into the gutter, considering his grand plan for the computerisation of the school roll-call. He'd win the Science Fair, possibly even the national finals. Yay! Benny was just lining up a crack gutter-shot when the pebble near his toe twitched.

'No way.' Dropping to his knees, Benny sized up the small grey mass. A tiny black eye gazed back at him. It was the tiniest baby bird Benny had ever seen with feathers. How it had survived so far he had no idea, but it was definitely not going to be his fault if the poor thing carked it now.

The nest took some time to locate, and Benny wasn't even sure he'd found the right one. He popped the baby bird into it anyway. 'Cuckoos are always doing this,' he said to the bird in what he hoped was a bird-like reassuring tone. 'You'll be fine.'

The black eye blinked back at him as Benny launched himself out of the tree. Darn. That was the school bell. Picking up the pace, Benny set off at a trot, skidding into the classroom just as Miss Masterton called out the last name on the class roll. She stared at Benny, then shook her head. 'Okay, Burton. Black mark for absence for you, and you can take the register to the office and explain to the school secretary.'

'Right,' said Benny with a sigh. Then, 'Right!' he said more cheerfully.

This was the perfect opportunity. He could substitute his computer programme for the morning's roll-call, and WOW the school secretary with it. Then she'd sell it on to all the teachers and the head for him. Job done, Science Fair won. He tucked the book in carefully beside his illegal lap-top, and settled in besides George for maths extension class.

Maths always took it out of George. At morning tea, he lay panting on the tarmac, like Bear Grills after a mountain mission. 'Water ... give me water,' he gasped. Benny handed over his flask, even though it had orange juice in it, and added a

sandwich for good measure. George tore at the soggy bread as if he'd been starving in the Serengeti. 'More!' he said, practically swallowing the thing whole. Then he turned to Benny in surprise. 'Ny hong,' he said, pointing at his mouth.

George's tongue was swelling like a snake that had just swallowed a rabbit, and both cheeks had turned scarlet. He held up the sandwich crust accusingly. 'Ea nut?' he said.

'No, almond,' said Benny. 'Honestly, it's almond. People don't get allergies to almonds.'

Then George screamed something at him which Benny translated as, 'I think I do, you moron,' at just the same moment that his friend keeled over and hit the tarmac all over again. Only this time, George appeared to be unconscious.

The teachers came running immediately, and Miss Masterton stared at Benny over George's prone body.

'This is the last straw, Benny Burton,' she said, wiggling the lolly stick she was using to hold George's tongue down to stop him choking himself. 'I want you to see George into the ambulance, as for some insane reason he seems to like you, and then go to Mr Peter's office at 11.30am.'

Benny gulped. This was not looking good. 'I could take over tongue duty if you like, Miss,' he said.

'Ambulance. Mr Peters. That's it.' Miss Masterton spat the words out so hard that Benny worried poor George would get wet.

He checked as George was trolleyed into the ambulance. All dry. Not very well, but dry. 'See you later, mate,' he whispered, but George just glared at him. At least he was alive enough to do that.

There was nothing else for it but to head up to the principal's office. He popped his head around the door and attempted a cheery grin. 'Hello, Miss Mays.'

The secretary glanced up from her filing. 'Ah, yes,' she said, as if that explained everything. 'The Principal's not here yet.'

'I'll come back,' said Benny.

'No, you won't. You'll sit down and wait here where I can see you. And at least try to sit still, thought I don't suppose a fidget like you knows how.'

Benny smothered another sigh as he sat down. Even the school secretary had unfair opinions about him. This day was going from bad to worse. And then Peters arrived.

'You again?' The principal threw open his door with a bang and nodded towards the Chair of Evil. 'Sit down, Burton.'

'There?'

'Yes. There.'

Benny lowered himself down with a wince. There was a school myth that Mr Peters had created the chair himself to torture school-kids without being noticed. Nails stuck out of it at odd angles, and unless you perched on the edge of it and sat up ram-rod straight, it creaked like a Scooby Doo house so that Peters could snap at you to shut up.

Peters bared his yellow teeth at Benny as he struggled to find his balance. It was meant to be a smile. 'You have been busy, haven't you?'

'Sir?'

'At least, I assume you've been busy,' said Peters, staring down at a long list of scribble on his desk. 'So busy you can't get to school on time.'

'No, well, yes, but you see there was a bird that had fallen out of its nest, and ...'

The principal held up a scrawny hand. 'Yes, I'm sure it needed rescuing. The same as the class register, I presume. You do know that the whole school office was searching for that thing for hours. Miss Mays couldn't believe we had a whole class that was absent. And then I thought ... hmm, who might have failed to deliver the register to the office? Do you know what name I came up with, Burton?'

'Mine, sir?'

Mr Peters gave him a thumbs up. 'Yours, Burton.'

'I was just going to suggest a new way of doing it, but then George sort of exploded on the playground and it went out of my head,' said Benny. 'Sir,' he added as an afterthought.

'Ah, yes - George. He's supposed to be your best friend. Gone off him, have we?'

Benny stared. George was brilliant. Without George there would be no point to his life at all. 'No ...' he said slowly. 'I haven't gone off him.'

'Then why,' said the principal, thrusting his face into Benny's so that he had to lean back on the Chair of Evil and make it screech, 'would you try to kill him?'

Ah. The peanut allergy thing. 'It was almond butter, sir,' shouted Benny. Not that there was much point in saying anything at all. Even with Benny yelling, Peters wasn't listening. The verdict was already decided.

'Save it for your father,' said Mr Peters, waving at the door. 'He'll be here in ten minutes to chastise you. I mean, collect you.'

Dismissed and in even bigger trouble than he could ever remember, Benny

trailed outside to Reception. Benny's cheeks burned as Mr Peters closed the door on him with a shake of his balding head.

Alone in the draughty reception area, he wondered just how much worse this day could get. Then he remembered. So much worse. His backside had hardly recovered from the last beating his father had given him, and that was just for failing to put the rubbish out "properly". He wouldn't be able to sit for a week when Dad heard about his latest escapades.

Grabbing his knees to stop them from shaking, Benny watched the clock.

Five minutes to his doom.

Three minutes.

One.

Now here's the amazing thing.

They are the exact same story. Exactly the same.

The only difference between the two version that one is 'shown' and would perhaps be a chapter of a book, and the other is 'told' and makes up barely a page of not terribly interesting information.

This is particularly useful technique for memoir writers, who often have a tendency to report everything, after the fact (obviously!), with no dialogue and very little liveliness at all.

A memoir which is shown rather than told will be far more interesting, and to a much wider audience, than the one which tell us:

There was the day we first started school. I was taken along in the buggy by Mrs Green next door, who told my mother that I wasn't appropriately dressed but took me anyway. My mother retorted that it was the best she could manage on my father's wages, and I sat silently in the buggy. The school was enormous with lots of teachers and classrooms, and we had to report in at the office to the lady behind the desk who told us to fill in four forms and then go ...

That would be okay as an introduction, but the reader wouldn't want this tone to go on for much longer.

Furthermore, if the writer were to show the reader everything that occurred, they'd be able to connect with it more easily, perhaps even recalling their own first day at school, and at least being entertained by a sensory experience.

I know it's not easy. It's worth understanding though, I promise you. Really worthwhile having a go.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Try out the whole process of how to show and not tell on this short piece of telling, from identifying the indicators of 'telling', and then expanding it by applying SALAD.

He was at the shop counter when he realised he'd left his wallet at home. He discussed it with the shopkeeper and they agreed that he should come back later when he had the money. Then he took the beer anyway.

Use SALAD to show the excerpt about the first day at school, or use your own memory of it to paint a picture for your readers.

There was the day we first started school. I was taken along in the buggy by Mrs Green next door, who told my mother that I wasn't appropriately dressed but took me anyway. My mother retorted that it was the best she could manage on my father's wages, and I sat silently in the buggy. The school was enormous with lots of teachers and classrooms, and we had to report in at the office to the lady behind the desk who told us to fill in four forms and then go ...

Your final exercise, as you may have guessed, is to go back to a piece of your own writing where you can identify instances of 'telling' (note down what they are), and have a go at re-writing it using SALAD in order to 'show' instead of 'tell'.

Summary:

Showing not telling is one of the most difficult concepts to grasp for writers as there's very little evidence of 'telling' that remains in published books;

Telling rather than showing is a strong signal to the reader (who may be a publisher) that the author is new to writing;

Indicators of telling include dense text, reported speech, and over-explanation that takes place after the fact;

How to 'show' is encapsulated in the mnemonic SALAD, as it's about keeping it light, and keeping the reader enjoying the experience;

SALAD is S for Subtlety, A for Action on the page, L for layering, A for As it happens, and D for Dialogue.

Chapter 7 Spit and Polish

And now we come to the penultimate chapter of your novel-writing guide.

Hopefully by now you'll have taken on board some practical ways to plan, plot and produce your book. It's been quite a journey. You've considered your characters, been shown how to 'show', and experimented with narrative voice. You may have jumped in and written a chapter, several chapters, or most of your novel, or you might have finally worked out what's been stopping you getting past chapter two all this time ... maybe because you're a perfectionist who can't close down your inner critic, or because you're actually a planner (though you may not have known this) and you need a map to follow.

Whatever stage you're at, you have the right to feel very proud of what you've achieved. How many people tell you that they want to write a book one day? I'm willing to bet the number has quadrupled since you mentioned you were doing this course! Well, you, my friend, have actually started one. It may not be fully-formed yet, but you know where you're going, albeit vaguely, and you have probably even got a roughed-out beginning or prologue under your belt. Well done. Very, very well done.

However, you may by now be pulling out your six pages of A4, holding them at arm's length as you peer at them, and saying to yourself, 'It just doesn't quite ... look right.' This is the point at which that nagging critic may well be telling you in a nasty nasal voice: 'You can't write. You can't! Whoever told you that you could? Does this look like Hemingway? I don't think so. No, no, no. That sheet of writing has about as much similarity to the page of a novel as dried sticks of pasta and whole tomatoes to spaghetti bolognese ...'

And so it goes on. The longer it goes on, the more you start to believe it, because when you're reading your story, you are only too aware yourself that it may not quite match the quality of the many published novels you've read. It's not possible for you to say exactly *why*, but there's definitely something missing ... or over-egged ... or ... or ... *something*.

Well, tell Nasty Nagness to be quiet. We're going to deal with it now. And you should be able to identify the areas where you need to add a little spit and polish, making a great ragu to create that spaghetti bolognese.

When I'm editing and assessing someone's novel, it tends to split into two distinct camps.

First, the structural elements: how well plotted is it; whether the characters likeable or believable and consistent; how far you have stuck to your chosen narrative voice or allowed it to roam and change throughout the book, making it hard to read. These are all the topics we covered in the first five chapters.

Then there is the other side of the book - the writing itself. This is where the magic happens; where the fairy dust is sprinkled over the book so the words spring to life and then disappear, so that the reader is completely engrossed in your story to the point of forgetting that life exists beyond it; where the conversations flow as if we were talking to our best friends, with these wonderful people who have somehow *become* our best friends; and where the wit and pathos of your writing style ease themselves over the foundations you have so carefully laid out like Harry Potter's Cloak of Invisibility.

And it's where the next phase of the journey begins, as your book wends its way to the publisher or to your readers, ready to cast a spell over all those who drink in your story with all the thirst of someone who's been lost in the desert.

In short, it's where you show rather than tell, where you add sizzle and sparkle with your language, and then where you allow your book to leave your side and take its place in the wider world. It's grown up. It's matured. Just as you have in your ambition to become a novelist - a writer who will write more than one great novel. Many more. It's time to finish this one, let it go, and move on to the next.

This is the part for me, when I am just 'head down and writing', that all that magic comes together. I'm no longer planning and shaping, I'm just opening myself up to whatever creative muse, god or bone in my body it is that enables me to lose myself for three or four hours as the words pour out of me. Next comes the wonderful exercise of becoming a word-smith, where I look back (briefly) at what I've written and select a few choice words to fancify and titivate so that the language zings in whatever way is most appropriate for my reader. It's where the writing really comes to life, and is polished to a mirrored sheen.

By now, your writing will already be lively and lovely, as your choice of voice brings authenticity to your narration, and your ability to show rather than tell has all that action unrolling on the page, right before the eyes of your entranced reader. Taking that a step further, we're now going to drill down into some of that 'showing' and make it even more evocative with our use of specific words that really add sizzle to your language. It's more than likely that in this chapter you will spot one or two issues that apply specifically to your writing - and if you can't see them yourself, don't worry. In the next chapter we'll discuss editing, assessing, and sending your novel away from home.

DIALOGUE

The first element of this is in your dialogue. I mentioned this in the last chapter as a way to show not tell, and also indicated that it's better if you don't try to be too inventive with ways to say 'he says' or 'I said'. Now we're going to discuss the construction of the dialogue itself, including the nitty gritty of punctuating it.

Exchanges

Some of the most useful dialogue techniques I learned came from my very brief career in writing scripts for a popular TV soap opera. The first is that you don't need to spend too much time - or any at all - on the common greetings and farewells that we tend to use in everyday conversation. Leave out all the 'Hi, how are you?' and the 'I'll see you later. Where did we say again?' and instantly your dialogue is much snappier. It's rather like what we said earlier about not stating the bleeding obvious: we can generally assume that this sort of exchange has already taken place. It's a given, so we don't have to spell it out for the reader.

Therefore this piece of dialogue ...

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget.

"No, Bridget," said Linda. "It's been a long time."

"How are you, Linda?" asked Bridget.

"I'm fine, thank you," said Linda. "How about you, Bridget?"

"Never better," said Bridget.

"That's good," said Linda.

"So when did I last see you, Linda?" said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. "I think it must have been at judo."

"That's right," said Bridget. "Do you still go?"

"No," said Linda. "I stopped going after that night."

"Me too."

"Why did you stop?" said Linda.

"Oh, you know, right, stuff got in the way," said Bridget mysteriously.

"Ah," said Linda.

"Look, how about you?" said Brenda.

"Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night." Linda smiled.

"Did you really?"

"Don't you remember, Bridget?" said Linda.

"Nah, I don't think so," said Bridget. "Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it."

"Me?"

"Sure, yes, with that illegal move you made."

"Gosh," said Bridget. "I didn't know that."

... becomes this piece of dialogue:

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget.

"No, Bridget," said Linda. "It's been a long time."

"So when did I last see you?" said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. "I think it must have been at judo."

"That's right," said Bridget. "Do you still go?"

"No," said Linda. "I stopped going after that night."

"Me too."

"Why did you stop?" said Linda.

"Oh, you know, right, stuff got in the way," said Bridget mysteriously.

"Ah," said Linda.

"Look, how about you?" said Brenda.

"Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night." Linda smiled.

"Did you really?"

"Don't you remember, Bridget?" said Linda.

"Nah, I don't think so," said Bridget. "Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it."

"Me?"

"Sure, yes, with that illegal move you made."

"Gosh," said Bridget. "I didn't know that."

Can you see how much more direct and pertinent that is already? Then the next thing to do is to take out all the filler words we do tend to use in everyday conversation, like 'Um', 'Listen', 'Look', 'Right', 'Yeah, no,' and so on. The aim of using these is usually to make the dialogue look like genuine conversation, but the effect on the page is to dilute the strength of the dialogue and make it look rather messy.

Then we can take out overuse of names, because in everyday conversation we tend not to use the other person's name after the initial greeting, unless we're shouting at them or calling out to them.

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget.

“No,” said Linda. “It’s been a long time.”

“So when did I last see you?” said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I think it must have been at judo.”

“That’s right,” said Bridget. “Do you still go?”

“No,” said Linda. “I stopped going after that night.”

“Me too.”

“Why did you stop?” said Linda.

“Oh, stuff got in the way,” said Bridget mysteriously.

“Ah,” said Linda.

“How about you?” said Brenda.

“I broke my leg that night.” Linda smiled.

“Did you really?”

“Don’t you remember?” said Linda.

“I don’t think so,” said Bridget. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“Me?”

“With that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

One, two, three and out

Already our piece of dialogue is much sharper, just by taking out a few unnecessary words. However, it could be sharper still. Here’s where my soap opera training proved invaluable to me, as I was introduced to the concept of **one, two, three, and out**.

By this we mean that character one says something, character two responds, character one says something else that moves the conversation to a climax or ending, and then either they finish the conversation (out) or the second character retorts one last time (and out).

In effect, you’re concentrating the dialogue down into the three or four pieces of information that turn the story, that move the plot along. If you can’t boil it down to three, remember that odd numbers work well in writing, so choose five and out, or seven and out. What are the critical pieces of information in our piece of dialogue now?

I’ve highlighted the important parts below:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget.

“No,” said Linda. “It’s been a long time.”

“So when did I last see you?” said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I think it must have been at judo.”

“That’s right,” said Bridget. “Do you still go?”

“No,” said Linda. “I stopped going after that night.”

“Me too.”

“Why did you stop?” said Linda.

“Oh, stuff got in the way,” said Bridget mysteriously.

“Ah,” said Linda.

“How about you?” said Brenda.

“I broke my leg that night.” Linda smiled.

“Did you really?”

“Don’t you remember?” said Linda.

“I don’t think so,” said Bridget. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“Me?”

“With that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

If we reduce the dialogue down to just the highlighted sections, it will look something like this:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget.

“So when did I last see you?”

“I think it must have been at judo.”

“I stopped going after that night.”

“How about you?” said Brenda.

“I broke my leg that night.” Linda smiled.

“Don’t you remember?” said Linda.

“I don’t think so,” said Bridget. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“With that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

You’ll hear, if you read that aloud, that the tone of the dialogue is subtly changing. Linda is starting to come across more strongly, perhaps even sounding bitter or sinister, while Bridget appears to be genuinely ignorant of what she did. However, the dialogue is still in tiny sound-bites that straggle down the page, and we could make it sizzle still further by using that concept of ‘one, two, three and out’.

Here's my example of how it might look.

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget. "When did I last see you?"

"It must have been at judo," said Linda. "That night I broke my leg. Don't you remember?"

"Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it with that illegal move you made."

And then you could make it tighter still:

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget. "When was it?"

"It was at judo," said Linda, "on the night I broke my leg. Don't you remember?"

Bridget looked bewildered. "Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it - with that illegal move you made."

Looking

And then! We can make it even tighter by substituting different words for the word 'looked', which is often greatly overused in new dialogue as the author attempts to convey to the reader just what the character is doing. That first piece of dialogue would often look (there you are, can't be avoided) like this when I see it in a pre-edited version as the writer tried to demonstrate every head turn and piece of eye contact that they are seeing in their mind's eye.

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget, looking directly at her old friend.

"No, Bridget," said Linda, looking Bridget up and down. "It's been a long time."

"So when did I last see you?" said Bridget, looking around.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully as she looked at Bridget. "I think it must have been at judo."

"That's right," said Bridget, looking up and to the right as she thought about it. "Do you still go?"

"No," said Linda, looking at her shoes. "I stopped going after that night."

"Me too."

"Why did you stop?" said Linda, looking curious.

"Oh, you know, right, stuff got in the way," said Bridget mysteriously, looking off to one side.

"Ah," said Linda.

"Look, how about you?" said Brenda, looking concerned.

"Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night," Linda smiled.

"Did you really?"

"Don't you remember, Bridget?" said Linda, looking hard at Bridget.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” said Bridget, looking into middle distance as if the memory was out there somewhere. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“Me?”

“Sure, yes, with that illegal move you made.” Linda looked cross.

“Gosh,” said Bridget, looking away with a red face. “I didn’t know that.”

Now, that may look over the top, but I can assure you that 80% of the manuscripts I look at look like that.

Ah. See how easily it’s done? Let me try that again.

Now, that may appear over the top, but I can assure you that 80% of the manuscript I see are written like that. Read through a section of your manuscript now, to ascertain whether you, too, are guilty of ‘over-looking’. Then try different verbs, or leave it out altogether.

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget. “When was it?”

“It was at judo,” said Linda, ‘on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?’

Bridget stared at her, bewildered. “Should I?”

“Well, you did it - with that illegal move you made.”

I hope you’ll agree that this is now a much more evocative and very much tighter piece of dialogue. Not only does it impart all the information as the first rambling section of dialogue, but it does it with additional atmosphere and apparent friction between the characters.

Speaker location

The other trick I use to keep dialogue interesting is to change the location of the speaker in the sentence. In the example below, every speaker is located at the end of the sentence:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages. When was it?” said Bridget.

“It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?” said Linda.

“Should I?” said Bridget, looking bewildered.

“Well, you did it - with that illegal move you made,” said Linda.

It's suddenly less interesting, isn't it? What I tend to do, in fairly regular rotation, is place the speaker at the beginning of the sentence, in the middle of the sentence, at the end of the sentence, and then I might not mention them at all. Sometimes I'll do it in the order of end, beginning, middle, no mention. It doesn't really matter which order you put them in - in a 'one, two, three and out' situation it will vary the pace and make your piece of dialogue feel and look polished and effective.

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages. When was it?" said Bridget.

Linda said, "It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don't you remember?"

"Should I?"

"Well, you did it," said Linda. "With that illegal move you made."

Then what I also like to do is change some of the 'she said' and 'he said' to complete sentences about some action that the character is making. It can subtly confirm details about what the character is feeling and going through.

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages. When was it?" said Bridget.

Linda let out a sharp laugh. "It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don't you remember?"

"Should I?"

"Well, you did it," said Linda. "With that illegal move you made."

Or

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages. When was it?" said Bridget.

Linda shrugged. "It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don't you remember?"

"Should I?"

"Well, you did it," said Linda. "With that illegal move you made."

One other thing to note here is that 'Linda shrugged' and 'Linda let out a sharp laugh' are complete sentences. Shrugging and laughing are actions, not ways of speaking, so they represent the verb in that sentence. Therefore they end with a full stop, not a comma, even though Linda then goes on to say something. This is usually the case with actions rather than ways of speaking, so in the line

"Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night," Linda smiled.

I would identify 'Linda smiled' as an action rather than a way of speaking and therefore a separate

sentence. It's a very subtle difference but adds ultimate polish and tone:

"Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night." Linda smiled.

Punctuation

Now we're down to the very last detail of dialogue writing. I've put it at the end, but actually it couldn't be more essential to the quality of your writing, as there's nothing more off-putting to an editor or publisher than a series of mistakes in grammar and punctuation.

I've assessed hundreds of manuscripts, and even with very experienced writers, I usually find at least one consistent error in the punctuation of their dialogue. For writers with less experience, the mistakes may be many and varied.

This can deter the publisher from reading your book, so it's crucial to get it right. If you know that this is a troublesome area for you, then I would strongly recommend that you hire an editor or proof reader to fix it for you (more in the next chapter).

In the meantime, some overall guidelines for you:

It doesn't matter if you use double speech marks "like this" or single speech marks 'like this', as long as you use them consistently. I always used to write my dialogue with double speech marks "like so", but then I noticed that the publisher often changed them all to single speech marks 'like these', and so I started to use singles myself anyway. It's up to you; just make sure that you stick with the same form throughout.

Whichever speech marks you've used - double or single - use the other form as quotation marks for any quotes. So if you've used double speech marks "like so", use single quotation marks 'like so' and vice versa.

Eg "I can't believe that the Prime Minister stated 'We will survive' with all this going on," said Janice.

Or 'I can't believe that the Prime Minister stated "We will survive" with all this going on,' said Janice.

Start each new piece of dialogue or speaker on a new line. In laying out your dialogue

and your manuscript overall, you either indent each new speaker or paragraph but then don't miss a line between, or you don't indent each new speaker or paragraph but you do miss a line between. The 'don't-indent-and-miss-a-line' technique is most commonly associated with non-fiction, as seen in the layout of this book. The other technique of indent-and-don't-miss-a-line is usually used for fiction, and the examples of writing throughout the book (in italics) use this format. Either is fine, to be honest, but as usual, whichever you've chosen, stick to it throughout.

There must **always** be a punctuation mark at the end of a piece of dialogue, be it a comma, full stop, question mark or exclamation mark (or occasionally a dash - or ellipses, the official name for dot dot dots). There is never a space or blank before the speech marks close.

So never:

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet” said Angie.

But always:

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet,” said Angie.

The punctuation mark at the end of the piece of dialogue must **always be inside** the closing speech marks. There is no occasion in which the comma or full stop appears outside the closing speech marks.

So never:

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet”, said Angie.

But always:

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet,” said Angie.

Ellipses are **always written as space three full stops and another space**, like this ... in the UK, and just three full stops and a space in US, like this... There are never more or less than three full stops, and also they should be used sparingly rather than each time you want to infer a pause, or you, the author, are stopping to have a think!

So never:

“Can I come in I need to use the toilet ..” said Angie.

But always:

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet ...” said Angie.

Avoid the tendency to find new ways of saying 'he said', although the occasional 'he muttered', 'he screamed' or 'he whispered' is fine. Try not to add unnecessarily

adverbs to these like 'he whispered quietly' (as whispers are usually quiet) unless you're pointing out something unusual: 'he whispered loudly enough to reach the ears of all bystanders'. Running quickly, shouting loudly, stammering disjointedly - all unnecessary adverbs (and some that are made up).

Try not to use too much of what I call 'stage direction', which is where you're seeing a scene in your mind's eye and translating it action by action for the reader. This generally results in a looking overload (and no, I wasn't swearing). Your reading fan will be able to work out for themselves that someone has answered the door by putting out a hand, turning the handle, yanking the door open and looking at the person who is standing on the threshold.

Verbs like smiling, grimacing, gesturing, winking and similar are not forms of speaking, they are separate actions as we discussed earlier. If you use verbs like these they usually make up a separate sentence and can't come immediately after a comma and close of speech marks.

So never:

"Can I come in? I need to use the toilet," grimaced Angie.

But always:

"Can I come in? I need to use the toilet." Angie grimaced.

Mum and Dad only have capitals when they are being used directly as the character's name; otherwise if you are talking about 'his mum' or 'my dad' then they are lower case. Furthermore, when you use someone's name, you put a comma before it.

So never:

"Can I come in mum? I need to use the toilet," she called to her Mother.

But always:

"Can I come in, Mum? I need to use the toilet," she called to her mother.

STRONG LANGUAGE

No, I don't mean swearing, although you may have done a lot of that during this programme. This is another piece of advice which will enable you to make your language sparkle, either in the dialogue between the speech marks, or in your straight narrative. It's quite simple, and you do it by looking back at your writing once you've done it and

changing some words appropriately. The advice is just this: make your verbs strong and active, and make your nouns specific.

Let's look at an example.

He went to the shop and got a book.

Not very exciting, is it? We'll attack the verbs first. The verbs in this sentence are 'went' and 'got'.

*He **went** to the shop and **got** a book.*

What strong, active verbs could we use in place of 'went'? And instead of 'got'? Insert those into your sentence, and you'll instantly feel uplifted.

Next, we'll improve our nouns. The first noun is actually a pronoun - he. Make that specific. Give him a name - perhaps one of your names that you created in the character development chapter. The other nouns are 'shop' and 'book'.

*He went the **shop** and got a **book**.*

We need to make those specific, so which shop is it? Does it have a name? Could you make up a name? The same goes for 'book'; which book? The magic book? A German dictionary? A pamphlet on becoming a bookseller? Now put all those options together into your new sentence. It might be like the following:

Jasper schlepped to the Corner Bookstore and perused 'Nirvana; Cobain.'

Or:

Jasper raced to Stories Galore and hid the last copy of The Never-to-be-Read Book.

You will probably have come up with something completely different! Whatever choices you've made, I'll guarantee that it's a lot more interesting than *He went to the shop and got a book*.

This is a technique used a great deal by comedians and in TV comedy; listen out for it, and you'll hear the use of proper nouns substituted for more general nouns (like Naggy

Nagness instead of 'the nagging voice'); strong, visual verbs instead replacing common 'doing' words (I always remember Marisa Tomei in the film, *My Cousin Vinny*, when Vinny asks her if he looks okay, and will he go unnoticed. She chomps her gum, rolls her eyes, and drawls, 'Oh, yaah. You *blend*,' in a perfect New Jersey accent. She says more about how ridiculous he looks with that one word than a whole page of dialogue). You, too, can use this to great effect in your writing, in your conversation so that you become known as A Great Wit, and in your Open Mic nights at the comedy club ...

So there we have it. That final sprinkle of the pixie dust (or Magician's Moolah, or Ash of All-Death, or whatever specific name you would have given it in your book) that will lift your language off the page and directly into the heart of the reader. In fact, you'll have written this so beautifully that everything you have learned throughout the online programme will become completely invisible to the reader. They will simply be aware that they are submerged, body and soul, in an amazing story by a fabulous author. They'll love it so much that they'll then search every dusty corner of *Stories Galore* for your next book ... and your next ... and your next ...

It's almost the end of our journey together. In the final chapter, we'll think about where this particular novel you've sprinkled with shimmering particles is going. You can take this as a challenge to write as much as you can before the next chapter, so that by then you're almost ready to *send it somewhere*.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Have a go at sharpening up this dialogue:

“Hey there, Susie, it’s been ages,” cried Jonathan.

“I know, Jonathon; I can’t imagine where all the time has gone,” postulated Susie authentically.

“You’re telling me, Susie, it’s just mad, isn’t it?” smiled Jonathan.

“So how’s your mum, Jonathan?” questioned Susie.

“Ah, yeah, she’s not been very well, actually, Susie,” Jonathan retorted.

“Yes, um, I’d heard that. What’s wrong with her?” said Susie in a concerned fashion.

“Look, she’s got a brain tumour,” moaned Jonathan.

“Right, that’s what I’d heard, Jonathan,” sympathised Susie. “I’m very sorry to hear about it.”

“Thanks.”

“So how are you coping, Jonathan?” queried Susie.

“Ah, well, you know, not all that well, really,” sighed Jonathan.

“Oh, why’s that?” said Susie questioningly.

“Because the twins are still in primary, right? And I keep being late for school because I have to take them there first,” replied Jonathan.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” agreed Susie.

“Tell me about it,” retorted Jonathan.

“But surely the school understands,” inquired Susie.

“I don’t think so,” suggested Jonathan.

“What makes you say that, Jonathan?” argued Susie.

“Well, yesterday they threatened to expel me,” explained Jonathan.

Try editing this dialogue and punctuating/laying it out properly (my example comes after the summary):

‘Hi dad’, shouted Gordon loudly as he came through the door and looked at his Father who was watching the TV.

His Father looked back at him across the room. “There you are, Gordon’ he grinned, ‘What took you so long Gordon’ he groaned frustratedly.

*‘Couldn’t find the right milk,’ said Gordon looking at his Dad with concern
‘I’m concerned about your lactose levels, dad’.*

Take a chunk of your writing, pore over it spotting weak verbs and dull nouns, and make them active and specific respectively. See how your writing comes to life.

Summary

How much your story sparkles (and how well it sells) will depend on the words you choose, the way you write, and how much spit and polish you apply.

Your writing style and the story you've chosen to tell is what adds that unique quality to your book, imbuing the plot structure and character arc and issues which are common to all books with your own inimitable magic.

Dialogue is a key component of showing not telling, and can be used to great effect to elevate your writing and move the story forward. However, it can often be soggy and poorly punctuated, so as writers we need to hone our craft to make sure it is properly laid out, grammatically correct, and sparkling and insightful.

Another way to make your story-telling sizzle is to ensure your verbs are strong and active, and your nouns and pronouns are specific. It can be useful to do this at the editing stage; you might find that the biggest area for substitution is to improve the verbs of coming, going and looking.

My attempt at Gordon and his father:

'Hi, Dad,' shouted Gordon as he came through the door.

His father was watching TV. "There you are, Gordon.' He grinned. 'What took you so long?'

'Couldn't find the right milk,' said Gordon. 'I'm concerned about your lactose levels, Dad'.

Chapter 8 Waving goodbye

At long last, the moment has come. Your baby has grown up. Matured. It's time to send them off for the next stage of life, hoping that at least some of what you've told them throughout your lives together has sunk in; that they know that however hard the coming months and years will be, you'll always be there to love and support them, even if your life has moved on a little too.

You stand on the doorstep with a strange conflict being hammered out in your heart: in one corner, the part of you that knows it's time to let go but still wants to cling on; in the other, the piece that's excited for your loved one, knowing that from this moment on, life will never be the same again. You clutch them to your chest one last time, plant a final kiss on their pale cheek, and wave goodbye, hoping fervently that they've washed behind their ears and you really did remember to pack everything they might need ...

Yes. Your novel is finished. It's time to wash behind its ears, pack its belongings in an appropriate piece of luggage, and send it on its way.

The trouble is, you're not sure which way it's supposed to go. And you're certainly not sure if it's the ears that need cleaning, or the back of the knees, or even its troubled soul.

In this, your final chapter on the novel writing programme, we will discuss many options for your novel's onward journey, and work out what you need to send and how it needs to be assembled. As with many journeys, starting a new one will make us reflect on the one we've just taken, so we'll cover some old ground while planning the next route.

Having considered all the options available to it, we've chosen which direction will suit our novel the most. Now we're going to wash your novel's extremities, load its little case, and point it in the right direction with all the hope in our hearts for its well-being and success that we can possibly muster. If it doesn't prosper now, it won't be for lack of trying on our part. We've done our job properly.

Now let's go back to the beginning ...

Considering the options

Remember, way back in chapter 1, that we identified the kind of novel you wanted to write? As well as that, we discussed why you wanted to write it in the first place: because you wanted to share your memoirs with a few close members of your family; because you had a story to tell and just wanted to get it down; or because you wanted to write a best-seller and garner some fame and fortune.

Perhaps you just wanted to see if you could do it - if that's the case, and you've written your novel, then congratulations. You've achieved what many people dream of doing and somehow never around to. You've written a novel, and deserve the heartiest of slaps on the back. Now you can put your novel away, tick that particular box on your bucket list, and start planning your hot air balloon trip up Everest, or whatever else you want to do before your personal sojourn on this earth reaches an end.

For many novelists, however, publication is the ultimate goal, not necessarily for fame and fortune (which is good, because that's very hard to come by!) but as validation. If it's good enough for someone to publish, then it's good enough for me, you'll say. It also leads - we hope - to that other thing craved by authors - an audience. Readers. Maybe even fans.

So now I'm going to talk you through a few of the options open to you in the 21st century to have your book published and to reach an audience. Without going into too much doom and gloom, I will point out that over the last few years it had been becoming increasingly difficult to get books published by mainstream publishers. Publishers have always declared that all it takes is 'a great story, well written', but with fewer prepared to take any risks on new authors, or even on old authors trying new genres or style, it was becoming almost impossible. I got feedback on one of my adult books that practically declared it was the best book the editor had seen in years, but ended with the sad decision that 'since Jill does not have a history of trade hardback adult fiction in US libraries, I'm afraid we can't take this book on.' This was a UK publisher, and came long after my success with *Jane Blonde*. And that was not the only response of this nature that I received over the last two or three years.

These were disheartening times, I confess, as there weren't many other options. Self-publishing had a bit of a poor reputation, and not without cause as self-published books

are often poorly edited, badly designed, and not very marketable. But then the very issue that had been worrying the publishers and making them ever more risk-averse began to take a pleasing turn for writers - the rise of the book market on the internet. Not only has it become possible for writers to convert their books quickly and easily to ebooks, they are also able to get them instantly to a readership via Amazon and other 'e-tailers'. Sales of ebooks have rapidly overtaken print book sales which are falling steadily quarter by quarter. However, if individuals do want to print copies of their books they can do it via print-on-demand facilities, and also sell them on Amazon.

Now, I'm sure you're aware of all of this. You only have to read about Borders and other booksellers going to the wall to appreciate that the world of publishing and bookselling has changed dramatically. This was brought home to me in big bold letters while watching the Graham Norton show recently, when he held up a book by one of his guests and said, 'IF you can find a bookshop, you'll be able to get this there.' He then said he'd bought it online, and he and the guest went on to discuss the ebook version instead.

Times are a-changing.

What you may not have thought about, however, is how this impacts on you as a novelist. To my mind, it's great news. It means the author can hang onto far more of their rights, increase their personal power, and reach readership without several gatekeepers getting in the way (and taking such large clips of the ticket at every stage that there's nothing left for the author). There are many, many options available to you now, and I'm about to outline a few of them so you can consider what you might do with your completed novel.

I talk about this whole topic much, much more in *Writers Gotta Write*, by the way, so if this is something that interests you, please find that book. If it interests you sufficiently that you'd like a blow-by-blow account of how to undertake every step to cover all eventualities in the publishing world, then come on my publishing programme. Details of both are on www.jillmarshallauthoracademy.com.

NB I've either had or heard of positive experiences with all the companies I mention here, but do shop around to find the people who will suit your needs most appropriately.

Self-publishing in print

I would recommend this if you want to print 50 or 500 copies and give them to your friends, or keep them on your shelf because a book's not a book in your mind unless it's something you can hold, stroke and thumb through.

The hardest part about self-publishing for a wider audience than your nearest and dearest is distribution, sales and marketing. Writers are often conservative souls, and not necessarily talented in the area of self-promotion. In addition, retailers are very wary of self-published work as the quality is often not that great. Of course, you can now print your book and sell it on Amazon (use Amazon Advantage) or your own website (see www.curlyfromshirley.com) - you may not get massive sales, if indeed you get any, but you will have your book available for sale and that might be what you were aiming for.

You'll need to consider the cost for printing to self-publish, too. A short run of 500 to 1000 books is likely to cost you a few thousand dollars, and you'll have to price your books at quite a high level to recoup your costs. You can bring this price down by going offshore to companies in Malaysia and China, so that might be worth investigating if you're planning on printing larger numbers.

A great option, if you just want 20 copies to give to your nearest and dearest and ... who knows ... maybe a film producer or someone, is to go to a company like www.lulu.com. They'll do a very nice job, talking you (online) all the way through it, and you can get hold of a couple of dozen copies of your very own novel for a few hundred dollars. Amazon has its own print-on-demand facilities too, in the form of Createspace, so you can go right from publication to sales via the same company. It's simple and I quite enjoy it doing it. It's how I've created this book, and now several of my novels are available in this way.

Ebooks

This can be another form of self-publication, of course, but isn't going to cost you anywhere near as much (in fact, very little) and will have your book available to a readership in a matter of days. Ebooks are read on a tablet like the Kindle (Amazon's own), the Nook (Barnes and Noble's own), the Kobo, Sony reader and the iPad. You're also able to read them on your computer, and often on mobile phones. Whether you love this idea or not will depend on whether you still consider this to be a 'real' book. I do,

and will happily read a book in any form as long as it's 'a great story, well written'. I'm not alone either - far more books these days are being sold as ebooks than in print.

There are two formats for ebooks: mobi, which is used by Amazon for the Kindle, and epub, which is used by everyone else. Somewhere along the line your manuscript has to be converted to one or both of these formats for it to be available as an ebook. Once it's available as an ebook, then it needs to be 'distributed' to the e-tailers in the same way a print book would be distributed to shops.

If this is the way you want to go, then you can go to companies like www.smashwords.com to convert your own work to the correct format, and then Smashwords distribute for you, taking a percentage of the sales price for their work. I've used Smashwords for both my own books and the books published via Pear Jam Books (my imprint). They're not yet able to distribute to Amazon because they don't convert to mobi, although this will no doubt change over time.

What you'll then have to do, of course, if you want to make large sales, is to work out how to market via the internet! You'll probably need a website, for instance, and be prepared to ask for reviews from everyone who reads the book and get them up on Amazon or reader sites like www.goodreads.com. There's a growing industry around just this facet of ebook sales, and quite a tough one to master if you're not that whizzy with the technology and, like me, you don't take naturally to tweeting and Facebooking and all that social media stuff. However, you might be happy to know simply that your book is out there, available for sale, and that you can tell someone about it in an email, anywhere in the world, and two minutes later they can be reading it. Brilliant.

Traditional publishing

Traditional publishers do still take on books, honestly! Not so often, and perhaps not with the large advances they might have paid in the past, but it can happen. Several of my clients have been taken on by publishers like Walker Books Australia, Faber & Faber UK, and Scholastic, New Holland and Penguin, to name but a few. That's still 'nirvana' for many authors, and as a well-published author myself I can assure you that the thrill of knowing your book is being published 'properly' is second to none. It's actually the reason why I've started a publishing company of my own, so that many more authors can experience that same thrill!

The way to get your book accepted by a publisher is to do your homework. Make sure you know exactly where you're sending it and why - because it's exactly the kind of book that you know they love, having read every title on their backlist several times over. If you discover that the way all those authors got published was to enter the annual competition run by that publishing house, then enter the competition. Find out what rules they want you to abide by: do they want the whole book or three chapters? Do they want hard copy or email submissions? Do they specify particular editors for your genre? Once you've discovered all that, you must do more homework to make sure your manuscript is in spectacular shape, and then send it off with a kiss for good luck. You will still need luck, I'm afraid, as excellent manuscripts are turned away daily for all sorts of reasons, but you can at least be assured that this rejection was nothing to do with the quality of your submission.

And how do you find out all this information? First of all, check the spine of your beloved books and find out who the publisher is. Check the inside page known as the 'imprint' page and find out if the publisher of this particular book is actually a smaller publisher owned by the parent company publisher. Then try their website, and check the submission guidelines. If they don't have a website, then you can find out all the information about any publisher (and agent, magazine, editor and so on) in the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook. It comes out every year and lists everyone you could possibly need to contact.

You may be wondering at this stage, as I've just mentioned them, whether you're going to need an agent. The answer is that it depends. If you're aiming for a small local market (like my erstwhile home territory of New Zealand), I would suggest that you're better off making the approaches yourself, and getting your book in front of the right people by checking out websites, entering competitions and so on. Many UK and US publishers, however, won't accept submissions without an agent (which is what they mean by 'unsolicited manuscripts') so if that's your intended market, work out who might be a good agent for you in the same way as checking out who might be a good publisher for your work: whose work is similar to yours? Who is their agent? Are they taking on new clients?

Agents have been as difficult to obtain as publishers in the past, but they are also feeling the pressures of the changes in the market and this may mean a shift in the availability of their services too. They're also all listed in the Writers' and Artists'

Yearbook.

So there are some options for you to consider. I'm sure there will be something there to suit you, from shouting 'Yay, I did it!' from your office window and sticking your manuscript in a drawer, to tracking down Dan Brown's agent at a New York cocktail party and impressing them so much with your story that they sign you up before you make it back to the airport.

However, something that is not an optional extra, whichever course you decide to take, is the high quality of your manuscript. It has to be properly, professionally, pedantically put together. Nothing less than near-perfection will do, whether you're doing an ebook or a submission to a publisher. You owe it to yourself, when all's said and done.

Washing its ears

First of all, please note that the **its** in 'washing its ears' has no apostrophe. Unlike the use of apostrophe s for the teacher's, John's etc, there is no apostrophe in the possessive for the word it. There is only an apostrophe when it's short for it is.

Picky, I know, but this is the kind of thing I mean by washing your manuscript's ears. It has to be as clean as possible. It has to look lovely, read well and hang together as a story. Excellent editing and presentation is what you need whichever of the above options you're planning to take for your novel. Inevitably, the odd error will slip through. There will be one or two in this book, I'm sure, despite extensive editing and proof-reading. Nevertheless, it pays to do whatever you can to get as close to spot-on as you can. There are various elements to this, and again, we'll look at the choices for you in turn.

Layout

The first thing to remember about the layout of your novel is that at this stage it is not a book, it's a manuscript, so please don't try to make it look like a book. Don't add covers, justify your text so it looks like the page of a book, lay out two pages side by side to give that extra 'booky' feel, or add dedications and acknowledgements. They'll all come in good time, once your novel has been accepted or is going to print.

For now it needs to look like a manuscript that an editor will be able to read easily. At

this stage they're just interested in whether you have a great story, well written, and they can judge this perfectly well from a well-presented manuscript.

The basic rules are these:

If still submitting on paper, use one side of plain A4 only

Double space your manuscript, which means go to paragraph on your home menu, click on the button with an up and down arrow on it, and select 2. Do not double space by entering at the end of every line as that will do horrible things to your formatting. The simpler the formatting, by the way, the easier the conversion to ebook as well, so get it right from the get-go and you can save yourself heaps of time and effort in the future.

Do not right justify - ie don't try to make it look like the page of a book, as again it does strange things to your formatting. Do left justify, so you have a straight margin at the left side of the page. The other side should look 'ragged', so not in a straight line.

As we discussed in the last chapter, you should either indent each new paragraph/speaker/speech (apart from the first word of a new chapter) and then don't miss a line between, or don't indent and do miss a line.

So either:

Indented and not missing a line between each new speech/speaker and paragraph.

I read my way through any books I can find on genetics and families and everything by Oliver Sachs. I even read my fa . . . his novels, having made Billy buy them for me at Sydney Airport, after the police get me to agree to drop charges against Brendon Allen.

'Pull your hat down, someone's staring at you,' says Billy in front of the duty-free shop.

'That's why I can't get the things myself,' I hiss. 'Then everyone would know it's true. He is my . . . you know.'

Billy sighs. 'What are they called, these books?'

'I don't know. Something "ana" and something "asia".'

'I can't go into Whitcoulls and ask for something "ana" and something "asia".'

'Just say they're by David Osgood. They'll find them on the computer.' Giving Billy a shove, I duck behind the wall to the nearby conveniences and take off my hat, staring at my telltale dark hair in the mirror. *Maybe it's time to go blonde.*

Billy is back before I can consider it further, whistling me from the concourse.

'Couldn't you find them?'

With a flourish, he pulls both books from behind his back. 'Are you kidding me? They were all over the place, piles of them all over the front of the shop, and every second customer in the queue is holding at least one of them. Is he really famous, your . . . David Osgood?'

'Not really. Not until now.' Being dead is doing him the power of good. *'Thanks, Billy-boy.'*

OR

Not indented and missing a line between each new speech/speaker and paragraph.

I read my way through any books I can find on genetics and families and everything by Oliver Sachs. I even read my fa . . . his novels, having made Billy buy them for me at Sydney Airport, after the police get me to agree to drop charges against Brendon Allen.

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customer in the queue is holding at least one of them. Is he really famous, your . . . David Osgood?’

‘Not really. Not until now.’ Being dead is doing him the power of good. ‘Thanks, Billy-boy.’

Font should be something clear and plain (I always use Times New Roman for manuscripts) and the size should be 12 point font. Keep it consistent throughout as again, the designer/publisher will put in quirky fonts and so on if required

You can *italicise* thoughts instead of putting them in speech marks, and also flashbacks and the like to make them stand out as different - but you don’t have to, so don’t bother if this is a worrying concept!

Put a header on your manuscript with the title and your name appearing on every page at the top, and the number appearing on every page at the bottom. You must number and name your pages in case by some error your manuscript ends up out of order.

Editing

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, whenever I’m assessing a book the editing tends to fall into two camps: structural and copy editing.

Structural editing covers all the types of topics we’ve gone over throughout the course, including showing not telling, character development, plot structures, soggy middles, red herrings and disappointing endings. Often you, the author, will have a very good idea of what is not quite right with your novel but it takes for someone else to point it out in order for you to deal with it. When I do quick assessments on live workshops, I always ask the writer ‘What do you think I’m going to say?’ and then inevitably they tell me exactly what needs work in their manuscript. There’s no shame in that - it’s very difficult to be impartial and objective about something you’ve been so close to for so long. An external pair of eyes is always handy.

Copy editing is the correction of typos, grammar, spelling, inconsistency and so on. It can sometimes be done by ‘proof-readers’ as well as copy editors. Again, from experience I’ve discovered that no matter how many times you check your manuscript,

and then your copy editor goes through it too, there are always mistakes in the finished article because you just become word-blind after reading it so many times. Fresh pair of eyes - incredibly helpful.

You will know yourself which of these areas you need the most help with. It may be both! So what can you do about it? Well, you might be able to ask a partner, friend or teacher to look over your work for you. I would check before doing this that they are as qualified to do it as you think they are, or they say they are! In addition, be wary of expecting neutral and useful feedback from people who have a vested interest in not hurting your feelings, or whose opinion you won't believe anyway because they're not a writer themselves, or sometimes even a reader.

You can get professional help with your manuscript, and I would highly recommend this if you want to send in as polished a manuscript as possible. You'll find manuscript assessors who look only at the structural elements, and copy editors who only do close copy work and correct poor grammar and punctuation. I sit in the middle because I can't bear to read something that's full of grammatical errors so I change them as I go along while I'm considering all the structural elements too! Shop around for the right person for you, who does what you need at a price you can justify. Your local or national author organisations like the Society of Authors will have information.

Sending it on its way

Okay, so now your manuscript is edited, proofed and primed to perfection. You've considered all your choices, found a means of getting your book out there that you wish to pursue, and now you're ready to send it off towards the horizon. At one time this meant sticking it in a big envelope and posting it off, and if you're in the UK or US you may still need to do this (check the submission guidelines in the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook). Many publishers, printers and ebook converters are happy to receive emails and electronic copies - just make sure you're sending the version they request.

What else to send?

Cover sheet

Put a clean and tidy cover sheet on your book, with the title in some interesting font, your name, what it is, and in the bottom right the wordcount, and in the bottom left

your contact details or the details of your agent. Don't add pictures and curlicues: just this will do very nicely.

Cover letter

I have known many a writer who can scribe a 70,000 word novel with hardly a hiccup, who then run into a brick wall when it comes to writing a cover letter. This is nothing to worry about as it will be quickly scanned to see if you've done anything really interesting (ie published already, won the Booker Prize, became the niece of their MD by marrying his nephew) and then they'll get straight on to the book.

You just need to include three things again (boy, these things-in-threes are important in writing!):

This is my book: just the title, the wordcount, and who it's aimed at.

This is about me: your background, other work published. This is not the place to say that your husband loved it, your mum cried when she read it, and so on. If you don't have direct experience, say something that will impress upon them how committed you are to writing - you've already planned the sequel, for instance.

This is about you: here you show how you've investigated the market, have long been a fan of their work, and that you've established that your book would be a good fit with their publishing.

Again, keep it on one page, and if you're sending an email application you can stick to the same basic format and it will still look fine in an email - though obviously you'd leave out the address of the publisher and so on.

Here's an example for you so you can see how straightforward it really is:

Susan Susanson
Perfect Publishers
Publishing Town
Publishing 1011

28 October 20XX

Dear Susan,

Please find enclosed/attached my novel, A Brilliant First. It has a wordcount of 85,000

words, and is for readers of 30+ in the historical fiction genre.

I am a high school teacher and a father, with a history degree and a love of great stories. I was the winner of the Adamson Short Story award in 2010, and have planned my next two books in this genre.

I hope that A Brilliant First might fit into your excellent 'Retrospectives' series, and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

N Ovelist

novelist@hotmail.co.us

Synopsis

For your novels, you'll often be asked to send the first three chapters (which is all the more reason to lose that unnecessary first chapter and sharpen up the first fifty pages!) along with a synopsis. Now, don't panic - synopses are not something to fret over, and many editors don't read them at all until they've decided they love your first three chapters and have to see what's going to happen.

On your behalf, I once asked my commissioning editor what she liked to see in a synopsis, and this is what she said (after telling me she didn't like them and would rather just read the book):

Keep it to a page

It should contain three key elements: firstly, a very short character list of the main two or three characters; secondly, one or two short paragraphs that describe what happens in the book, and remember that you're not writing a blurb for the back cover and leaving the reader on a cliff-hanger so you need to say what happens in the end; thirdly, some indication of the style in which the book is written. If your book is funny and satirical, write a funny and satirical synopsis that reflects the way you've written the book.

What you may find if you do this well enough is that it does become the blurb on the back cover in time, but for now that's not your concern. You just need to get the message across quickly, succinctly and somewhat poetically to your reader. And that's

it. Nothing to freeze over.

Sending off

In the old days, you would parcel all this up into a cardboard folder (so it wouldn't slip off the slush pile which is literally a teetering mount of manuscripts sitting on the desk - or sometimes the floor - of the commissioning editor).

You'd then also put a big elastic band around it, and post it away with either a self-addressed envelope so it could be returned to you, or a message at the end of your cover letter saying 'please recycle'. If wherever you're sending your book to still requires a hard copy, then this is the way to send it, though you probably don't need to say anything about sending back your copy as you'll have it on your computer.

If you're sending an email application, make sure your manuscript is as free of red and green lines and squiggles as possible (which you can do by turning off spell and grammar checking and Tracked Changes, going to the Review tab in word and clicking 'Accept all changes', making sure you've deleted any comments, and clicking on 'final' in the drop-down menu which may show 'final with amendments', 'original with amendments' etc).

Ensure your cover sheet is part of the manuscript, attach a separate synopsis and put your 'cover letter' in the email itself.

And that's it. Your novel is completed. It's gone on to the next stage of its journey. As for you? Well, it's on to the next stage of your personal too.

My best advice to you now? Let go.

You've written your novel. You've polished it to a gleaming sheen, wet your hand and smoothed its hair, and now it's gone. Give yourself a wee bit of a break - to reconnect with the outside world; to enjoy some of your other past-times; to grieve a little for the loved ones with whom you have spent the last six months, and who have now disappeared over the horizons. You'll see them again soon enough, but for now, it's okay to admit that you miss them.

But let them go. In a few days, weeks or even months, a new set of friends will arrive, and you should spend your time with them. Though it's hard to believe at the moment,

they'll mean every bit as much to you as the last lot, once you've allowed them to come out to play.

I do hope you've enjoyed your novel writing guide. I really hope you love and adore the wonderful novel you've started to create.

Good luck with this novel. And then on to the next - because now you're a writer, and WRITERS GOTTA WRITE.

See you at the book awards,

Jillx

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