

Lesson 1.

SCOPE & NATURE OF FICTION

Lesson Aim

Describe the nature and scope of fiction writing.

THE ELEMENTS OF FICTION WRITING

Fiction is writing that includes imaginary characters, events and/or settings created by the writer. All of the components of a fictitious story do not necessarily need to be fictitious though:

- Imaginary characters might be set in a real world setting such as a well known city or a particular country.
- Characters might be fictitious, but set in a “real” event. For example, you might write about the experiences of a fictitious character during World War II.
- Real characters may be used for a fictitious story that embraces an imaginary event or setting (eg. a story about William Shakespeare travelling through time; or something more realistic, like a summer’s holiday at a fictitious beach resort, taken by a famous historical figure such as Mozart).

Two Types of Fiction

There are traditionally two types of fiction:

a) CATEGORY

Also referred to as ‘genre’, these stories have a distinct theme and as such are easy to categorise. Examples of category or genre fiction are science fiction, westerns, adventure, crime, historical, romance, horror, erotica, mystery, suspense, fantasy and war stories.

When selecting a genre or category of fiction to focus on, it is best to choose one that suits your interests, knowledge and experience. Otherwise, be prepared to do a lot of research so you can credibly write about your chosen subjects. For example, if you have an enthusiastic interest in medieval English times and you have read extensively about feudal society, the king’s court, knights, the crusades, peasants etc, you would be in a strong position to write a historical novel set in that period. But you probably should avoid starting with an adolescent girls’ novels about a pony club if you dislike children and know nothing about horses.

b) MAINSTREAM

These stories are aimed at the widest possible audience. They typically deal with most aspects of modern life including relationships, careers, and the search for success and fulfilment. Popular mainstream writers include Jeffrey Archer, Jackie Collins, Colleen McCullough and James Michener.

Characteristics of Category Fiction

There are five characteristics which are usually common to category fiction stories:

1. A strong plot

Frequently the age-old standard plot is used, where a hero is confronted with a very serious problem; he pursues a solution but faces more and more problems; then finally, faced with a desperate situation, the solution emerges to result in a happy ending.

The underpinning driver of plot is conflict. Conflict is situation or person that undermines the perfect ideal of how things “should” be. This could mean a literal conflict between two characters, or some other form of cataclysm that interrupts the harmony of your protagonist’s existence. Conflict is an essential ingredient to good storytelling. It provides the momentum for the plot, the reason for your characters to exist and interact, and it sets up the eventual denouement or resolution to your story. In fact, without conflict, you don’t have a story.

For example, if you went on a holiday to a tropical destination, the weather was beautiful, you sunbathed on the beach, read books, slept, relaxed and had an essentially perfect holiday, it would be a very boring story to tell your friends when you got home. But it would be a completely gripping yarn if everything went wrong. Imagine they lost your bags at the airport and you arrived at your hotel with nothing but the clothes on your back, only to discover it was on fire and all the guests had been evacuated. You could not find a room anywhere so you then spent the week camped under a palm tree in driving rain with only a garbage bag for shelter. During a particularly gusty wind you were knocked unconscious by a falling coconut and spent the rest of the trip looking like an extra from *The Mummy Returns* after the hospital over-bandaged your head to protect your 17 stitches. The sun finally came out on the last day you were there so you rushed out to the beach to make the most of it and got third degree sunburn, necessitating taking your flight home wearing nothing but a sarong and lashings of aloe vera lotion. You finally arrived in your home city, reeking of unwashed body and with small animals living in your matted hair, only to find your bags waiting on the conveyor belt as though they’d never left. The labels on your luggage indicated that it had arrived via Denmark, the Ukraine and Dubai. All had been opened and searched, your underwear was missing and someone had replaced your hairdryer with a handgun and a pair of pliers. You could eat out on a story like that for years.

If you watch a typical situation comedy on television (eg the Simpsons) you will see a classic conflict-driven story-telling structure. The program begins with the status quo, a problem arises, more problems ensue, then the problem is ultimately overcome and the status quo is reinstated by the end of the show.

2. A hero or heroine

The hero is the main character of the story, also known as the protagonist. He/she usually has strong personal qualities and engages the sympathies of the reader. It is important that your readership is able to identify with or admire your hero in some way. If the audience doesn’t like or engage with your hero, they will quickly lose motivation to read the rest of your story.

In some cases you may choose to create a protagonist who is an anti-hero – that is, someone who does not fit the traditional heroic mould but who has other redeeming qualities. For example, Bruce Willis’ character in the movie Armageddon is a rough, anti-social oil-rig owner with a violent streak, bad manners and poor parenting style. But he is a loyal friend, loves his daughter fiercely and ultimately sacrifices his own life to protect her future (and to save the world). An anti-hero should be used only if his/her character is shown as being strong and true to their own set of values (which may differ to the values of the reader).

3. Obvious motivation

The purpose to which the hero or heroine aspires must be clear and easily grasped by the reader, whether it be to achieve love, fame, fortune, conquer evil, survive a series of trials or something else equally positive and easy to grasp. If the hero's motivation is unclear, your story will appear to lack direction and the reader will become frustrated. The experience for the reader would be rather like watching an unfamiliar sport and not knowing the rules – the players would appear to be running around with no purpose and achieving nothing. If your hero has no clearly defined goal, his/her actions will appear pointless, rendering your story pointless, and the reader will lose interest.

4. Plenty of action

To keep your audience interested, your story should include plenty of action. Look to develop situations which will lead to problems which must then be solved, and perhaps while solving a problem, further problems will develop. The story should include frequent confrontations between characters and their environment. You may also introduce changes in scenery (the characters move from place to place), to generate interest and opportunities for further problems. For example, your characters may be on a quest to find treasure and face many life-threatening dangers on the way.

If you choose to set your entire story in a single location (eg a single room, a cave, a prison cell) you will need to work harder to create interest and opportunities for conflict and it is likely that your protagonist will have a more passive role in the story. In the case of a prison cell, the central action will derive from characters (guards, visitors, other prisoners) or other entities (weapons, digging tools, drugs, rats, food) coming and going from the space, rather than from your protagonist's actions.

5. A colourful background or setting

Exotic or out-of-the-ordinary locations are frequently used to enhance the category story. Depending on the category and plot, the story might take place on another planet, a cavern beneath the earth, another period in time, or even amongst people leading a lifestyle in our society which is quite different to the norm (eg. people in high society, people living in a commune). If you are going to set your story in an out-of-the-ordinary location, make sure you have considerable knowledge about that type of location, or your descriptions will lack credibility.

Characteristics of Mainstream Fiction

A typical popular modern novel has the following characteristics:

1. A strong plot with a traditional beginning, middle and end. It has believable motivation and conflict.
2. Plenty of action, and some intrigue.
3. A hero or heroine with whom the reader can identify.
4. Romantic interest.
5. A happy ending.

Of course, there are countless variations, but these are the *main* elements that you will find in mainstream fiction.

BOOK, PLAY or SHORT STORY?

Your approach to writing fiction will vary according to how long the work is and the medium you are writing for. A work of fiction can be long or short, and written for print or electronic publishing.

Children's books may be relatively short, but even a short novel might be 30,000 words. A novel of 200 to 250 pages would have perhaps 75,000 words. Some novels are longer.

Short stories published in magazines may be perhaps 1500 to several thousand words in length.

Fiction may also be written in other forms: as poetry, a film, play or radio script, or even a song lyric.

CATEGORY STORIES

Fantasy

The dictionary defines fantasy as "fancy, mental image; caprice; hallucination".

Fantasy always includes events that are unlikely, if not impossible, in real life. It usually contains unrealistic settings, characters and events.

Fantasy is a broad term that can encompass a range of different categories including fairy tales, myths, fables, science fiction, and others.

Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are fictitious stories that involve romance and legendary deeds, where the characters include fictitious creatures such as fairies, witches, wizards, dragons, gnomes and elves. They are usually, but not always exclusively, written for children.

Fables

Fables are stories which teach a moral (i.e. a principle or rule to live by). They often include animals or inanimate objects that are personified. Aesop's tales (eg The Tortoise and the Hare) are classic examples of fables.

Myths

Myths are stories designed to explain a belief, natural event or phenomenon. The word "myth" has evolved in modern times and has come to be associated with things that are not true but it originally derives from the Greek word mythos, which simply means narrative or story. Myths concern extra-ordinary characters (usually heroes or gods) and are usually attempts to explain or interpret natural events in a supernatural way. All cultures and religions have their own mythology, including the Aboriginal "Dreamtime" used to explain creation, the Christian stories of creation and Noah's ark, and the extensive Greek mythology relating to its various deities and their activities.

Legends

Legends are stories passed down through generations of people, which originated so long ago that their truth cannot be verified. They may be partially or fully fictitious, but there is no way to be sure. The main character may often be real (i.e. he/she/it actually existed), and the setting may very well have been real but the tales may have been embellished in the retelling. They sometimes involve elements of the supernatural.

Science Fiction

Science fiction is fantasy that incorporates science or technology into the story. Often the setting is in the future, in space or on another planet; but this does not necessarily need to be the case. Science fiction can be set in the real world, but simply incorporate some "imaginary" elements of science or technology. It can even be set in the past.

Westerns

Westerns are stories where the setting is in the frontier American west; usually stories about cowboys or cowboys and Indians.

Drama

A drama is a story that stirs the emotions. It makes people feel tense at times, and more relaxed at other times; sad on occasions, and happy on other occasions. It is usually an emotional roller coaster.

Romance

Romance stories also stir the emotions, but are normally gentler than dramas. They may create the emotional highs and lows of a period, but the overall feeling of the story should be a warm, perhaps calming and satisfying one.

Comedy

Comedies are designed to make people laugh or at least smile. They can range from slapstick comedy, where the drive is physical conflict (eg a man's head comes into conflict with a bucket full of paint), right through the black comedy, where subjects that are usually treated in a serious way (eg death) become the source of humour.

Horror

Horror stories prey upon universal human fears, such as fear of death, mutilation, monsters etc to give readers the thrill of fear and of exploring the taboo. Originally borne out of primitive fears of the devil and supernatural evil forces, horror stories often revolve around evil entities intruding into everyday life. They are designed to alarm and terrify while simultaneously exciting readers in much the same way as a ride at an amusement park might elicit screams of both terror and excitement. Generally, horror stories end with some kind of catharsis in which a level of normalcy is restored. This could be equated to the experience of a rider safely exiting a rollercoaster at the end of the ride. In this way, horror stories simultaneously unsettle and reassure the reader.

Crime

Crime fiction is a genre that covers a broad range of writing, from whodunits through to legal dramas. A branch of crime writing which is growing in popularity is one in which the writers explore the graphic and unsettling elements of violent crime (including lurid descriptions of the corpse, method of dispatch and autopsy scenes). The genre could be considered the horror genre of the contemporary era in the sense that it plays upon modern fears and insecurities (eg of being raped or murdered in an increasingly violent society). As with horror stories, the denouement generally involves a catharsis of some kind, eg the killer is caught, but this is not necessarily the case. In Bret Ellis' novel *American Psycho*, the killer is never brought to justice, further fuelling the reader's niggling sense of being unsafe in a dangerous world.

Suspense

A suspense story aims to keep the reader guessing. It must contain uncertainty or anxiety. The reader will be told just enough to secure their attention, but information will be held back in order to build tension. It will finally be revealed at points in the story which are beyond where the reader desperately wants to know that information. In effect, the writer is creating a desire, and suspending delivery of information to satisfy that desire.

Erotica

Erotica is literature that deals with sexual love. Theoretically, it differs from pornography in the sense that it aspires to an artistic aesthetic rather than simply aiming to stimulate sexual desire for commercial purposes.

GETTING AN IDEA

There are many different ways a fiction writer might develop an idea for a story. Some writers stumble across more ideas than they can use. Others need to work at getting an idea. Here are some methods you might use to get started:

Using a Fragment

Often the best story ideas will be triggered by a fragment of a thought or a single image in your mind that you can then develop into something more substantial. For example, you may have a flashback to a dream you had the night before while you are eating your cornflakes and it could become a building block of a larger narrative. Or you may see a discarded shoe while you are out jogging and your internal speculations about how it came to be there could lead to a great short story. If you ever have a moment in your day where you pause and think, "that was interesting", ponder whatever it was that caught your attention as these moments can often lead to wonderfully creative ideas.

Get philosophical

Do you ever catch yourself going on a rant about a pet subject? Maybe you have a bee in your bonnet about cosmetic surgery or sleazy politicians or 'young people today'... Whatever it is that gets your blood boiling or your juices flowing is likely to be a good source of story ideas. Next time you hear yourself getting passionate about any particular subject, listen to the themes coming out in your monologues. Think about how you could express some of your ideas as the philosophical foundation for a work of fiction. If you choose to use this technique, be very careful about simply "sermonising" in your work, however. People do not want to be told what to think. Your ideas should inform your work, not take it over. For example, if you think people are racing in to needlessly mutilate their bodies with cosmetic surgery, you could write a science fiction piece set in a town populated with stretched plastic people. Don't simply create a character who spends half the story rabbiting on about how bad cosmetic surgery is. That would just be boring. The point of this approach is to *illustrate* your ideas with an interesting story rather than merely *espousing* your ideas through your story.

Writing out titles for stories

Keep a note pad with you at all times, and write down titles whenever you think of them, e.g. Dirty Dawn, The Phantom Child, Cold Steel, Flowers from Ashes, The Green Moon. Titles like this will conjure up images which can be thought over and developed. If one of

the titles you write down seems to conjure up stronger images, you might try rearranging/reworking that title to suit the images better.

Developing a story from an opening sentence

The first sentence of a story is frequently the most important. It grabs the readers attention (if it is good), and sets the mood for the story to follow. Write down a number of different opening sentences with the aim of, above all, capturing the reader's attention. The sentence which conjures the strongest images in your mind is probably the best of a batch to work with.

BACKSTORY

Backstory is what happened to your character before the start of your short story or novel. Think of backstory as the background information you need for the story to have a context, and drama, along with twists and turns. Backstory is often presented by using flashbacks.

Although you may begin your story with a main event in a character's life, you need to understand your character's history in order to breathe life into the character's future. Creating your characters backgrounds and history in your own mind and on paper, will also help you to create stronger and more interesting protagonists and villains.

TYPES OF WRITING

There are four main types of writing. All writing falls into one of those groups:

1. EXPOSITION

- Its purpose is to explain something to the reader. Generally facts are presented then analysed.

2. ARGUMENT

- Its purpose is to persuade the reader.

3. DESCRIPTION

-Its purpose is to create an impression of something.

4. NARRATIVE

- Its purpose is to tell a story.

THEME DEVELOPMENT

The following outlines depict several ways a theme can be developed:

Deductive

Used where there are two or more things to be discussed. The main idea of the writing is revealed early, and other things which relate to it are discussed as the work progresses.

Inductive

Here the main idea is saved till the end of the writing. Everything written about throughout the piece leads to a conclusion, a moral or some type of revelation at the end.

Classic

Combines both deductive and inductive. There is discussion around a theme throughout the passage, but still a major conclusion or revelation at the end.

Chronological

The writing develops in order of a time framework. That which occurs first is discussed first, that which occurred last is discussed last.

Descriptive

The passage gives a strong impression of that which is described.

How to do something

If you are an expert in the subject you are writing about, you can write along the lines of "How To". If you are not an expert, you are better to write "How it is done".

Analogy

This is where comparisons are made between two things.

Argument

An argument can be dangerous. It is important to remember that there are always opposing views which are virtually impossible to change. Your best option is to present the facts, and then tell the reader to draw their own conclusions.

Balanced

Here the first half of the work will inevitably lead to the second half.

Cause and effect

The results (effect) of some event, action or idea are shown.

Classification

Here you show how something or group of things are classified.

Definition, Analysis

Used to classify, categorise or explain confusing things.

Comparison and contrast

Here both similarities and differences between things are shown.

Summary

Reviewing something in a shorter version.

Flashback

Looking into the past.

Evolution of narrative

A new form of narrative is beginning to develop as a result of seminal cinematic works such as *Pulp Fiction*. This film approaches narrative in a completely different way to the traditional, subverting the chronology of the tale so completely that it is impossible to define which part of the story is 'now' and which part is happening in flashback or flash forward. This is just one example of the ways it is possible to depart from traditional approaches to achieve a particular effect.

WRITING AN ANALOGY

An analogy deals with two or more things which resemble each other. It discusses how two or more things are similar to each other. Analogies are generally short pieces of writing. They may, however, form part of a larger work such as a book. Generally an analogy is used to clarify something by comparing it with something else. It implies that something difficult to grasp is similar to something which is easier to grasp, hence making it easier to understand the more difficult thing.

It is important that you be certain the "easier to grasp" part of the analogy is in fact familiar to your readers. If you are going to say two things are alike, you must explain in what way they are alike if clarity is to be maintained. Be careful to explain any dissimilarity between the things being compared. Don't attempt explanations of the difficult partner in an analogy if you are not familiar with that "item" or "thing". Remember at all times an analogy must be precise and accurate. A complicated thing can only "partially" be explained by drawing an analogy with something more easily grasped.

WRITING A BALANCED THEME

A balanced theme is one where the first half of the passage leads logically and inevitably to the second half. This type of theme is in two parts:

The first half includes facts and details.

The second half covers the effects or conclusions which arise from these facts or details.

If you are very sure of your subject you may wait until the second part before stating the main idea (i.e. the generalization or thesis).

If you are not an expert on your theme, you are advised to write no more than three sentences at the beginning of the work before stating the main idea. The first half will still be principally facts or details, but the theme will be revealed earlier. It is much more difficult to hold the piece of writing together without revealing the theme early on.

ARE YOU SUITED TO WRITING FICTION?

A fiction writer needs to be imaginative, informed and in tune with human behaviour.

Imagination

Good fiction requires imagination. You need to be able to conjure up credible and engaging scenarios, characters, locations etc and communicate them in an interesting and creative way. If your experience in writing is limited to pure reporting of facts, such as with technical writing, and you feel uncomfortable 'making things up' then you probably don't have the right kind of mind for fiction writing. If you love the idea of letting your imagination run wild and creating new worlds for your little people to run around having adventures in, then fiction writing is for you.

An imaginative mind alone, though, will not qualify you as a good storyteller.

Being Informed

Good fiction needs to be believable. This does not mean it has to be realistic. You would hardly expect the “magic” world of a fairy tale to be encountered in real life. The characters of a fairy tale, however, should be shown to behave in a way that is appropriate to the story and situation they are placed in.

The details of a fictitious story will be more believable if they reflect the real world which the reader lives in. By including things from real life in a story, the reader can better identify with the story, and that makes it more believable. For example, in a historical romance the author may include names of places and things that were known to people living at that time in history.

Good fiction is often based upon life experience. The person who has lived a rich life and had a diverse range of experiences will be able to draw on aspects of those many and varied experiences, and use them within a story.

Human Behaviour

Good fiction writers must have at least a basic understanding of human psychology, and be able to understand and display empathy, sympathy, compassion and identification with the people they write about. The people in a story should become “real” to the writer. A person who is always logical and rarely emotional may find it difficult to write fiction. They may lack enough comprehension of the full scope of the human emotional experience to be able to project personality and credible emotional responses onto their various characters.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOCUS

Always maintain a clear focus on what you are writing about.

- *Avoid becoming verbose for no real reason.*
- *Avoid straying from the general path of the story.*

There should be reason behind every word you write in a story. Either it is there to convey a feeling or information. If it is not contributing to the story, it should not be there. This becomes increasingly relevant the shorter your piece of writing is. For example, in a full length novel, it may be acceptable to relate anecdotes or information about a character purely to provide background but in a short story, unless that detail contributes directly to the propulsion of the plot in some way, it is irrelevant and unnecessary and it will simply distract the reader.

Writers can easily become verbose, writing passages that could convey the same information through fewer words. This may be acceptable if those extra words are needed to convey a mood or feeling; for example, perhaps to slow down the rate at which dramatic information is revealed, and in doing so, maintaining suspense. But be judicious about how you do this to prevent your story from dragging.

A story should follow a logical path from beginning to end, with everything being told in between having some relevance to the ending. There is little point (and potential confusion) when you stray from the subject. For example, if the story is a romance which culminates in the hero and heroine getting married, why write about the murder of an

acquaintance they meet along the way? To introduce such an event without a clear reason is simply losing focus and introducing irrelevance to the story.

Keep reminding yourself of the big picture as you write a story; and testing yourself to ensure you maintain a clear focus on the type of story you are writing.

- *Remain consistent and focused on the category (eg. romance, fantasy).*
- *Remain consistent and focused on the type of theme development (eg. chronological, deductive, argumentative).*

TERMINOLOGY

Protagonist: The main character in a fictional story.

Antagonist: The thing or person that is in conflict with the protagonist in a story.

	SELF ASSESSMENT Perform the self assessment test titled 'Test 1.1.' If you answer incorrectly, review the notes and try the test again.
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SET TASK

Find a short fiction story in a newspaper or magazine. Read and analyse this story, answering the following questions. (Cut out, or copy the story, so you can submit it when you send this lesson's assignment.)

1. How was the theme developed?
(Analogy, Chronological, Deductive, etc.)
2. How would you categorise this work?
(Fantasy, Suspense, Comedy, Drama, etc)
3. Recognising that there are certain characteristics common to a fiction story, identify each of the following, if it exists, within this story:
 - A strong plot
 - A protagonist
 - An obvious motivation
 - Action
 - A colourful background
 - An antagonist

	ASSIGNMENT Download and do the assignment called 'Lesson 1 Assignment'.
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