

Building a Better Novel

by

Mike Valentino

<http://www.editor-ghostwriter.com/>

A Novelist is Born...

So you've decided to write a novel. Congratulations. Few things in life are as rewarding as seeing your name on a completed work of literature. Of course, writing a story that is entertaining, enlightening and memorable is a tall order. Not impossible – but much more difficult than most people realize. Long ago in my career as an editor I discovered that many new writers underestimate how much hard work and dedication goes into writing a well-crafted novel. The problem is, in their zeal to get their story typed into the computer they never bother to learn the fundamentals, time-honored techniques and tools of the trade used by every successful novelist. All of your favorite fiction authors have fine-tuned these competitive advantages and employ them regularly. Now you will too.

Step Away from the Computer! Don't Start Writing Yet!

If you remember only one snippet of advice from this book, let it be this: have a plan of action before you write a single word. Don't think *I'll just start writing and see what happens*. That's a recipe for disaster. Some people hate the idea of writing an outline. It just feels so darn “formal” almost like some kind of academic paper you dreaded writing

back in school. But that's not what I'm talking about here. Nobody else ever needs to read your outline. Its only purpose is to make sure that you have some kind of game plan to keep yourself on track. Start with the most basic of basics, making sure, that your story has a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. Then start filling in the details of what will need to take place in your plot to initiate the story, move it forward, add new complications and then bring it to a satisfying conclusion.

Sounds challenging? It is, but you'll thank yourself later for patiently thinking things out rather than recklessly plowing ahead without any roadmap at all (which is a great way to end up lost). You're free to make all of the changes or adjustments that you want to later. None of this is set in stone. The point is, at least now you will have a written plan of action that you can always refer back to for guidance.

Important Decisions: First Person or Third? Past or Present Tense?

Resolve these issues well in advance of writing your opening sentence. The decisions that you make right now will shape the style of your writing throughout the entire project. Choose carefully, and keep in mind the techniques that your own favorite authors have used. Go back and read some of their work again. Would their approach make sense for you, or should you try something different? There is no right or wrong answer, but it's crucial to understand the pros and cons of your various options.

First Person or Third?

The narrative voice that you choose will influence every other aspect of your novel.

Third person narration (where an omniscient narrator relates the story to the reader) is by far the most common these days, probably because of the many advantages that it offers.

When you are using third person you can write whole scenes and chapters from other people's (other than the hero's) point of view (POV). The good part about this is oftentimes in a novel the reader begins to weary of the hero's problems and point of view. It doesn't mean that you have a boring story, it's just that people like a change of pace. With third person, you can reinvigorate your narrative at the beginning of a new chapter by switching to another character's POV and depicting what he or she is doing, or describe what is happening elsewhere.

First person narration, on the other hand, does not enjoy this flexibility. You need to stick with the main character's POV throughout the entire novel, as this character also serves as narrator. On the plus side, though, if you are writing in the first person you can establish a real bond with your readers because you are telling them first hand what you (i.e., your main character, "I") is doing and saying and experiencing. This makes the reader empathetic to the hero almost from the very beginning. You just have to keep the aforementioned limitations in mind. He can't go off in the next chapter and talk about what the villain is doing because he (the hero) is not in the scene and consequently doesn't know what the villain is doing.

Past or Present Tense?

Most novels are told in the past tense since fiction is basically about a story that has already happened. Some writers say that they prefer present tense, as it conveys more of a sense of “immediacy.” While there may be some merit to this claim, especially if you’re writing your first novel, the best advice is probably to stick with the more conventional method, which is more or less universally recognized as such.

How to Create a Memorable Plot

What readers like in stories is curiosity and suspense. They want to worry about what’s going to happen next and how things are going to turn out for the hero/heroine.

To make your readers worry you must establish the hero’s main problem. This is the main thing the reader will be concerned with throughout the story, whether it’s a novella or a saga over a thousand pages long. This dilemma needs to be introduced early, the key elements of the story must relate to it, and the ending must resolve the issue that you posed at the outset.

Consider, for example, a typical WWII plot. Our hero, Joe, is the executive officer of a submarine. He says to his wife, “I think my skipper’s a coward. He left a man on deck while we submerged during an air attack. I don’t want to serve with him but the boss says I can’t transfer right now and I have a dangerous mission coming up.”

Readers will worry. Will Joe be able to do his job and not endanger his ship because of his lack of confidence in the skipper? Whatever the stated goal, readers will keep it in mind and worry about it.

Once readers have started to worry, however you can't expect them to worry endlessly about the same situation. Stories must grow and develop as the lead character tries and fails and tries again. You need twists and turns in your plot - smaller but intense dramatic situations that pull readers through the pages and affect your hero's path to some kind of eventual solution. That is the function of scenes.

In fact, a novel is essentially a collection of scenes in a logical progression. Pick up one of your favorite novels and read it again. At the heart of most of its scenes, the hero struggles against opposition to move forward in his quest. When he's successful, it moves him closer to his story goal, and when he fails it sets him back from it.

The scene begins when your hero sets out with a specific, short-term goal, something he wants to accomplish or attain that he thinks will bring him a step closer to his long term story goal. In Joe's case he does not want to let his lack of confidence in the captain to endanger his ship and crew. We come to a scene in which the captain insists on constant drills to get from topside to below at a "Dive" order in record time. Joe says to the captain, "Sir, this crew is not a bunch of rookies. Why do they have to break the record. Their response time is fast enough for Navy requirements."

"But not for my requirements, Lieutenant," comes the reply. "The drills will continue." Now that we have set up a dilemma and a short-term goal for the hero, we can depict it for the readers through a suitably dramatic scene. Because of the captain's actions -- and Joe questioning his orders -- the crew is becoming resentful and sullen. Will they now resent the captain too? Will they respect his judgement? The operation of the vessel depends on sailors having confidence in their leader. Has Joe let his own

doubts endanger all of them? So now there is even more for the reader to worry about, as the plot continues to develop one scene at a time.

A Novel Without Conflict Is Not a Novel

Conflict is the heart of a scene and without it the scene would be utterly worthless.

What if Joe makes his plea and the Captain says, “Okay Joe you’ve convinced me. The crew is indeed carrying out the Dive order fast enough!”

Good for Joe. Bad for you.

Suspense is built through setbacks not through good news. Whenever things are going well for Joe the reader relaxes. You don’t want that. To make your story work Joe should not get a happy answer from his nemesis. At least not at first. He must instead get conflict-exciting, eventful, suspenseful conflict.

When things go smoothly, the reader isn’t worried anymore and the suspense and conflict escape your story like air out of a balloon. To the contrary, the two opponents must struggle, maneuver, perhaps misunderstand one another, escalate, and try different tactics. The tension may well develop into anger. It’s not that the characters have to all be fighting each other in a novel...but a story revolving around a group of happy campers will put your readers to sleep. Have the campers get lost in the woods and then struggle over who should lead the group -- before a raging forest fire engulfs them -- and now you have a novel.

To make the conflict dramatic, it’s essential to have a short-term goal and you must also have an exterior struggle that the audience can visualize and follow. The

conflict might be verbal, it might be physical, or it might involve bullets flying in a Western novel or a crime thriller. Whatever it is, it has to be depicted via word pictures that are as clear as a movie screen. If the outer conflict exacerbates the character's inner conflict, that's even better. But first we must have the external fight that readers can see and enjoy dramatically.

Memorable Characters = Loyal Readers

The best fiction is character driven. That is not to say that the plot is not important but if our novel is successful it will be because the readers remember the characters more than anything else. Here are some tips for developing character.

What's in a Name?

One of the first things the reader usually learns about a character is his/her name. Don't underestimate just how important this first impression is. First impressions are the most lasting.

Sometimes we grab a name for a major character out of the air, and fail to give it sufficient thought. What if we have a character named Mary Margaret Burns? What happens if we change her name to Candy Kane? Or Fifi? Or Sister Innocence? You can sense the possibilities.

Is there a difference implied by the name alone? Is an intrinsic distinction in personality and / or background internalized in the readers when they come across such

diametrically different names such as George Washington Jones or Tony DiRosario or Baron Rothschild or Billy Bob Dibbs?

Even the way you choose to refer to a character or subsequent reference on may affect your reader's perception of him. After first telling the reader your character's name is Jack Dangerfield will you later refer to him as "Jack," or "Dangerfield"? Referring to our character Jack Dangerfield as "Jack" on subsequent reference tends to warm the tone of the story and subtly soften the style, so that this first name decision alone might make him somehow seem a softer character.

In a spy novel or suspense yarn, where the tone is generally cool anyway, most characters almost always will be called by their last names only. In a romance where the tone is intimate, the opposite might be true. The bottom line is, a character's name will profoundly influence the reader's perception of that character.

Personal History

In addition to knowing your character's name of course there are different things you need to know about him or her. How elaborately you devise a past for a character will depend on that person's role in the novel. A major character obviously needs more created past than a walk-on.

Be careful in what you reveal about a character's history. Even a fairly important character may not demand an elaborate personal history if he happens to be a grim,

reticent, mysterious figure whose unknown past actually contributes to the sense of menace he radiates.

Genre affects how much history you need to invent for a character too. In a romance novel, the checkered past of several characters may be explored at some length while in a traditional Western you may only need to know that the gunman had a hard life and once narrowly escaped hanging.

In the case of almost any major character, however, you should at least be able to fill out an imaginary job application.

- * Name and address
- * Date and place of birth
- * Parents' names, ages, occupations, social status and present whereabouts
- * Education
- * Marital status and children, if any
- * Military background, if any
- * Health
- * Job background
- * Financial situation
- * Awards, achievements of note, etc.
- * Hobbies
- * Favorite pastimes such as favorite music, authors, sports events, entertainment personalities, etc.
- * Ambitions

What Drives This Person?

Well defined goals and motivations are indispensable for solid storytelling. So it follows that a character to some degree will be defined by the goals he selects during the course of the novel. Someone once said, “Tell me what a person strives for and I’ll tell you what kind of a person he is.”

Your study of the character’s past and how it leads to his present goal in the story is vital.

The man who is fanatical to become governor of his state is quite a different sort than his neighbor who says all he wants in life is to be left alone. The woman whose goal is to be president of her law firm is different from her sister, who wants to find a good man, marry and settle down. The gold miner is different from the coal miner.

The moral here: The wise novelist is sure of what every character wants before launching into writing about him. Take, for example, a successful novel I was involved with entitled, “The Matchmaker.” The main character, Jill Sands, works as a matchmaker for a high-priced Beverly Hills agency, and is driven by money and success. However, as we later learn, earlier in life she was an idealistic kind of woman who cared more about helping people than padding her bank account. When a good friend of hers is murdered, and Jill risks everything to catch the killer, it now makes sense to the reader: she is returning to her ideals to do what is right. The entire novel works because the

character was drawn in such a way that she appears to readers as a multi-dimensional flesh and blood human being with both flaws and virtues. Just like in real life.

Dialogue: The Lifeblood of Vibrant Fiction

Pick up any three novels on this month's best seller rack and you will find they have one thing in common: the characters talk to each other. A lot. Dialogue is an opportunity and should be put to work. It presents information succinctly, making it unnecessary to have long, tedious blocks of narrative to explain things. And it does so in a much more interesting way for the reader. Consider this climatic scene from "The Matchmaker":

Ivana switched into a different mode now, more subdued, open to a dialogue. She smiled carefully. "I have had a...special...relationship with Senator Donnelly for many years," she explained. "Soon, his new wife finds this out. She comes to Beverly Hills, to me, tells me she will tell the media about Phillip and I if we do not -- how do you say? -- cool it. I try to reason with her, but she runs off. Nobody can find her. She went to your cabin, but Edward got there too late. We begin to worry that she may do something foolish."

Jill was starting to get the picture. And her blood was beginning to boil. "Something foolish," she repeated. "Like exposing your affair in the media?"

"Precisely. So I directed this man Edward to find her at all costs." Ivana jabbed her finger into the air. "Not to kill her, just to talk some sense into her. I did not know at the time how...unstable...this man was. He apparently is a brute, forces himself on women. He struggled with her. She resisted. And..." Ivana spread out her hands in front of her. She seemed to be asking for absolution.

It was almost impossible for Jill to digest everything she was hearing. She snuffed out her cigarette in the ashtray, her eyes suspicious. "I really don't think I understand, Ivana. Why did you come up here to tell me all of this?"

"Because Edward knows you are trying to find him, to have him punished for what he did. And he will not stop looking for you until you are dead."

This was getting more and more bizarre, and Jill felt like she was being deceived. "So now you want to help me all of a sudden. Why?" Her expression was hard. Cold. A look she had never shown to her boss before. But she didn't care anymore, all of that became irrelevant in a heartbeat.

In this handful of paragraphs -- almost all dialogue -- just about everything that the heroine had been investigating has been revealed. Even more importantly, the dialogue does so by both increasing the tension between the characters and by moving the story forward. Whatever genre you write in, this is precisely the kind of conversations that

your novel needs. It's not just people talking to each other. Every word has been carefully chosen to serve the author's purposes.

Ineffective Dialogue Spells Disaster for Your Novel

You may have dreamed up a thought-provoking plot and populated your novel with intense, unique characters...but if your dialogue falls flat, the entire novel goes right into the trash. I know that's kind of harsh, but this ingredient is just too important to leave out. Try baking chocolate chip cookies without the chocolate chips. Probably not a great idea.

But what exactly is it that new novelists do to sabotage their dialogue? The biggest problem is that too many of the conversations between characters are just "filler," and fail to either build character or add anything meaningful to the story. For example take a look at the following dialogue:

"Morning, Mom. What's for breakfast?"

"We're having blueberry pancakes this morning, Johnny. Do you want any?"

"Yeah. I think I will. I'm starving this morning. Can I have three?"

"I need enough to serve your brother and sister too. But uh, let me see. Okay.

Sure. Coming up."

Asleep yet? Now some might argue that this scene is OK because it depicts legitimate talking between characters in a novel. And that's dialogue, right? Well, yes and no. On the one hand, it may indeed be the way people actually talk in everyday life. In fact, you might very well hear the same conversation at your own breakfast table tomorrow morning. Yet, the truth is, this kind of dialogue has no place in a novel, and will quickly kill it, as it is boring and pointless. Most significantly, it fails to move the story forward in any way.

Just because certain things happen in "real life" doesn't mean they need to show up in your novel. It is not the way dialogue is or should be done in fiction.

However, what if, rewording the same scene, we used the dialogue to reveal something about the characters. For example, Mom grumbles, "No, Johnny, you can't have three. Your brother is going to work today and he's going to need more." Does this mean that Mom favors the brother over Johnny? Or maybe she's digging at Johnny for not having a job. At least you've raised a few different possibilities. But if nothing like that is being conveyed, then the dialogue shouldn't be in there. It's a waste of space and pages to convey not much but a routine, probably unimportant and mundane piece of information, and novels aren't written to be mundane. The important lesson to remember is that the dialogue should reveal something about the characters, and at least give the readers something to think about.

Tension

Here's something else you need to learn about effective dialogue: it should only be used when there is some level of tension between the speakers. Now I don't necessarily mean, "Mom, I demand at least three pancakes and I don't care what my brother wants." It can be subtle, something like Johnny saying, "Since he got this job I have to do all his chores around here." It's not very overt, but it does suggest that maybe Johnny is resentful of his brother and feels Mom is favoring him. There is a certain tension, which opens up possibilities, and possibilities always engage our attention. True, it's not a high level of tension but then again not every passage calls for or needs intense drama. The point is, dialogue isn't just people talking to each other. It serves much more important functions for both plot and character development.

The point is, the dialogue should reveal something about the speaker and there should be some level of tension between the speakers. If these elements are missing from your dialogue, rewrite it! Fiction is all about tension between people and the dialogue should reflect it.

Whatever you do, don't fill up your novel with trivial fluff like, "Good morning. Looks like it's gonna rain again." And the answer is, "Yeah, lots of clouds." Blah blah blah. This is considered 'housekeeping' and adds little impact to your writing. The first question would only be acceptable if the reply comes back with something like, "I sure hope not. The river's damn near flood stage already, another couple days and this whole town will be underwater."

See the difference? Now an element of danger and adventure has been introduced. The mundane conversation has suddenly turned serious. This makes it much more likely what your readers will keep turning the pages to find out what happens next.

Tone, Style and Accents

An archbishop speaks in an elevated style, a truck driver, perhaps, in an idiomatic or slangy style. Whoever he or she is, make the style fit your character. This does not mean you need to engage in stereotyping, but it does mean that you need to portray your characters' speech realistically. Use your own everyday conversations with people from all backgrounds and walks of life as a guide. Develop a good ear for picking up on the subtle nuances of how different people speak, and use this as the basis for making the word choices and speech patterns of your characters as authentic as possible.

As for accents, yes, they can make your writing more colorful, but it is not a good idea to try and use an accent throughout your entire novel. Better to identify once (maybe twice) how a person speaks and then move on. Don't worry, the readers will remember. For example, if a Midwesterner teases a character from Massachusetts for dropping the "r" when he says the word, "car" that one incident says it all. The reader will from now on mentally "hear" the "r" dropped from that character's speech for the rest of the novel, without the author tediously writing "cah," (car) "fah," (far) etc. Not only with this fail to enhance characterization, in fact it will distract the reader from more important stuff.

Overuse of Names

Let's say there are only two people in a conversation. Let's call them Bob and Alice. Whatever else you do, please don't start or end each sentence with *Bob said*, and the following sentence with *Alice said*. When your dialogue goes back and forth like this endlessly, it soon feels like a Ping-Pong match. We know there is only Bob and Alice talking so there's no need to keep identifying. Do so sparingly, just enough so that the reader is never confused about who is speaking.

But that doesn't mean that when you do identify the speakers, you have to be afraid of overusing the word *said*. Some novice writers think it is boring to the reader to use the word *said* frequently throughout the novel. So they will employ synonyms like, *Bob stated*, or *Bob declared*, or *Bob exclaimed*, or *Bob retorted* or *Bob responded*...you get the idea. The truth is, "said" is such an innocuous, forgettable little word that oftentimes it best fits the need. The reader in most cases does not even realize he just read "said," and instead keeps his focus on the dialogue itself (especially if it is well written). The exceptions are when the dialogue is enhanced by more descriptive words such as *muttered*, *mumbled*, *gasp*, *blurted*, *commanded*, *lamented*, *cried*, *agonized*, *joked*, etc. There is undoubtedly a time and place for these other words, but *said* is the best choice more often than not.

You also don't need to constantly use each character's name within the dialogue itself:

"Good morning, Bob. Getting ready for work?"

"I think I'm staying home today, Alice."

"What's the matter, Bob?"

"I think I'm coming down with the flu, Alice."

This is a real turn-off for readers and completely unnecessary.

Inflection

Good dialogue differs from real life dialogue in another significant way. It's written out, rather than audible. The reader gets the words without the inflection, meaning that it can be ambiguous if not done properly. There are different techniques to address this problem. For example, you can italicize a word to show that the speaker is stating it emphatically. "Let's get out of here *now*." You can also use action and description to suggest the way the character must sound. For example, it sounds kind of lame to say, "To heck with you," Harry said angrily. A better choice would be: His face turning beet red, Harry growled, "To heck with you." See the difference?

Show Don't Tell

Most new writers have heard the old adage, "show don't tell." It's a time-honored principle that really does improve your writing when practiced consistently. But often it is misunderstood. At the heart of the problem, as I see it, are narrators who want to use adverbs to "tell" readers what is happening in a scene instead of action verbs to "show" them, as vividly as possible, precisely what is going on. Telling makes you feel like you are reading a very boring novel (which is usually correct), while showing creates sharp visual images in your mind's eye that rival what you see on TV or at the movies. Which kind of novel is worth your hard-earned money?

The best place to begin mastering the “show don’t tell” concept is to slash your use of adverbs. You might be amazed by how much stronger this one step makes your writing. In the vast majority of cases, adverbs can be removed from a sentence without harming it at all, if the writer has done his job in setting the scene, tone and action. More often than not, adverbs indicate that the writer is afraid he hasn’t made a particular point clear enough. Compare these two sentences:

A) In the gloom of the rain forest he heard something higher and behind him. It sounded like an animal. Tom quickly turned around to see what it was. (This example tells the reader something).

B) In the gloom of the rain forest he heard something higher and behind him. It sounded like an animal. Tom spun around. (This example shows the reader something).

Strive to remove at least 50% of all the adverbs in your manuscript and if you can get rid of more, go for it. Here’s a hint: most of them end in “ly.”

Another mistake is describing a setting or an action in a passive manner rather than active. Here’s an example:

When you write, “Tom was a tall man,” you have told the reader something rather than showing the reader something. The passive verb in this sentence, “was”, should be replaced with an action verb that actually depicts Tom doing something that shows how tall he is, a sentence where the reader can see the action. So if you write, “Tom ducked under the doorway to enter the room,” you get a much more descriptive sentence that is now very easy to visualize.

In fact, try to eliminate as many forms of the verb “to be” as you can from your writing. All forms of this particular verb (he was, he is, he will be) simply tell about a

“state of being.” No action. Dull. No word pictures painted in your mind. Read the following example and you will literally “see” (and in this case “hear”) what I mean.

“The angry bull was chasing Tom who ran quickly across the field.”

Change that to, “The raging bull thundered across the field as Tom dashed for his life.” A huge difference by replacing just a few key words! Do this throughout your novel and treat your readers to much more powerful, descriptive writing.

Point of View

I can’t tell you how often I’ve dealt with point of view (POV) issues with new writers, and admittedly it’s a difficult concept to nail down. The point of view of a character is how he sees, hears and thinks about something or someone. That means that the point of view has to remain his and only his throughout the scene. The POV should not be changed to another character’s POV in the same scene. Yet in practice this is much easier said than done.

You can only get into one character’s head at a time in the same scene. That is his or her POV. For example, Bob meets Alice. He thinks, *boy, she sure is pretty*. Now, while Alice is regarding Bob who is admiring her she can, of course, react to his smiles and words but what you can’t do here is tell the reader what Alice is thinking. You can’t write: As Bob smiled at her, Alice thought, *wow, he likes me*. Or any other thoughts Alice has. However, what you can do is show her reaction. She smiled shyly, she blushed, she seemed upset at his attention and flattery, etc. But you can’t get into her

head and know what she's thinking. Not in the same scene. One point of view at a time, please.

However, when you change scenes (which can be a new chapter or simply a new scene in the same chapter and Alice is somewhere else), now you can have her think, *boy, that Bob sure is handsome*. And by the same token if Bob happens to be in that scene too, now we cannot know what he is thinking (because the scene is told from Alice's POV), so once again we as readers can only speculate what is going on inside of his head by gauging his reactions and behaviors. The author cannot depict him thinking, *Gee, I wonder what that little smirk means*.

How Do I Describe This?

Description is vital in fiction because it draws pictures in the reader's mind about what a person or place looks like. It sets the scene. And the mood. And just about everything else in your novel.

Boring and dull descriptions are the bane of creative writing. When describing a house on a cliff (or anything else) you can write, "the old house was high up on the cliff." This is a rather mundane description. It tells you that there is an old house up on a cliff, but can you really "see" the old house? Maybe. More likely not. The description doesn't really conjure up any particular image other than the simple 'house on a cliff.'

On the other hand if you wrote, “The rickety old house clung to the cliff like it was holding on for dear life,” now you get the sight and sense of an old house that could be in danger of falling. The imagery of this is clearer and therefore more powerful. That boring, dull word “was,” by the way, disappeared in the improved description.

The trick here is to give inanimate objects life. Of course we know a house can’t cling, at least not in the sense that a person does. But here we have not only given an inanimate object life but there is a metaphor in here too -- that old things are in jeopardy. The trick here is to have your object *do* things. Have them cling (like the house) or if, for example, describing a heavily laden bomber taking off you can have it “claw at the sky” for altitude.

When it comes to describing people, some writers simply give a description that reads like a police report. “Twenty two years old, five foot two, 120 pounds, green eyes, blonde hair.” Can you see this person? Are you interested in this person? I doubt it.

Instead, say things like, “She had an upward turn of the lips and a wide mouth that made her appear to be smiling, even when she wasn’t. Her wet straw blonde hair was a tussled mop that could be coifed with a couple of hand fluffings. The emerald eyes were wide, inquisitive and full of life. All this made her seem bright and happy.”

Which description better enables you to see and maybe discern who this person is? I know which one gets my vote.

Coincidence in Fiction

Writers are often warned to avoid the use of coincidence in fiction. And with good reason, coincidence (“a remarkable concurrence of events apparently arranged by chance”) weakens a plot by making it seem unrealistic. But when used correctly, coincidence can actually enhance the tension and interest of your story.

To understand how coincidence can be used effectively you must first understand why and when it will not work.

Readers will reject coincidences that resolve plot difficulties. Let’s say your protagonist, a fortyish successful politician has spent thirty pages berating the female matchmaker for not finding him a perfect match. Then on page thirty one he realizes that she, the matchmaker is the girl of his dreams. You hope readers will react with, “Oh wow!” but because this is an implausible, out of the blue, coincidence readers are more likely to think, “Oh come on now!” Writers use coincidence to resolve plots when they are desperate for an ending or cannot create events that grow logically from earlier events and characters’ choices.

Acceptable Coincidences

You can use coincidence effectively in certain situations. For example, when coincidence *sets up* a plot complication instead of resolving it: the young detective is researching another adoption history and accidentally learns the identity of her own biological mother. The reader will accept it because the story is yet to come.

Coincidence also works when events seem remarkable or contrived at the time, but are logically explained as more information is revealed to the reader and/or the protagonist. This creates tension because the reader wonders, how could that possibly happen? Part of the fun is continuing to read to find out the true answer (i.e., the CIA set up the various coincidences as part of a trap to catch a double agent – now it all makes sense to the reader).

Just be very careful, because as a novelist you have to work so hard to convince readers that everything in your book is plausible. Blow your credibility with a far-fetched coincidence and your audience may not take you seriously at all and soon lose interest in what you have to say.

Flashbacks

Flashback is literary license to go anywhere in time, forward, backward, etc., thus making the fictional “present” clearer and more interesting to your reader. For example, if something that happened when your main character was much younger is important to the story, a flashback sequence showing the reader the events as they unfolded could be quite helpful.

However, don’t make the mistake of spending so much time in the past, or jumping around from past to present then back again, that the reader gets confused. Also, you need to be sure that all of the details (such as ages, dates, and the descriptions of places) are appropriate for the time period. Even if it is the same character, times change,

so the world of a character named Harry Jones in 1975 will be very different from the world of that same Harry Jones in 2011.

Happy Endings

Almost as daunting a challenge as deciding how to open a novel is deciding how to end it. Whether or not the ending is “happy” is pretty much irrelevant. What really matters is whether or not the ending comes across to the reader as both realistic and satisfying. How you pull that off will of course depend on the kind of novel that you have written.

Let’s consider a few examples. At the end of George Orwell’s classic, *1984*, the hero is killed by the totalitarian government. While this is depressing, it was the perfect way for Orwell to make his point, that when a society surrenders individual rights, it makes it impossible for individuals to stand up to the injustices of a corrupt state. Certainly not happy, but a fittingly brutal and morose ending for a somber book intended as a dire warning.

By contrast, in *The Matchmaker*, the heroine and her archenemy engage in a violent life and death struggle in the novel’s climatic scene. Overcoming incredible odds, the heroine defeats the bad guy and has a chance at a new life with the man she has fallen in love with. Moreover, the adventure has taught her some important lessons about herself and her place in the world. Again, there is a moral to the story, and it is reflected in how the author wrapped things up in the end.

Whatever you do, please don’t make the glaring mistake that I’ve seen countless times over 15 years of editing novels: the **every problem in the character’s life is**

solved ending. It's one thing for the hero to achieve his goal and resolve his primary conflict – it's quite another for him to become a multi-millionaire, cure cancer, achieve world peace, marry the girl of his dreams and live happily ever after. Believe it or not, I have read many first novels where authors have gone to ridiculous extremes because they think that is what makes a happy ending. To the contrary, unless you've written a fairytale, ending your story with a poignant scene that offers a satisfying yet realistic solution is always a much better bet.

One More Thing...

So, now that you're ready to get behind the keyboard and hammer out the Great American Novel, let me leave you with one final word of advice. Be yourself. Write only about things that interest you. Take inspiration from your favorite novelists, but don't try to copy them. Be original. Don't worry that nobody else will like it – you have to like it yourself first, or you will never have the requisite enthusiasm to become a successful novelist. After all, writing a novel may be a lot of hard work, but it's a labor of love.

I hope you found my eBook helpful and that it aided in launching your effort to build a successful novel, or strengthening a novel you've already begun. Want even more help? Take advantage of a free editing or ghostwriting sample today, and let me show you how together we can elevate your writing to the next level. You can email me at editormikev@aol.com or call me at 978-462-3013.