

# THE WRITING BOOK



Gurmeet Mattu

Hi, my name's Gurmeet Mattu and I'm a professional writer. I've had plays performed on stage, had radio plays broadcast, sold sitcoms to BBC Television and even won an award for my screenplay, Disciple, so I know what I'm talking about.

Despite having an agent and all this success I've never been able to find a publisher for my novels and this set me to thinking. With computers and the internet it's quite possible to get your writing in front of an audience by publishing an e-book. I've, therefore, set up as a digital publisher using the name Ma2books. My website is at <http://ma2books.webplus.net> and was originally intended only to sell my stuff, but I soon realised that many other good writers were in the same boat as me and would appreciate me publishing their books. So I threw the doors open and welcomed them in. The company is growing but there's still room for more writers and more books. This publication, The Writing Book, is intended for novice writers and contains two main elements. Firstly there are a few short essays I've written concerning my thoughts on various aspects of writing. They're light-hearted and are intended for a general audience. I've also added a Complete Creative Writing Course with 15 Modules that cover all the basic elements of writing fiction. This should prove invaluable to any novice writers, if only to help them build up their confidence, which is a vital component for the writer. I am a qualified coach and the Modules are designed to be intuitive and easy to follow, concluding with a set of Tasks to follow. My hope is that this will encourage writers to write their novels and submit them to Ma2books with a view to publishing, for a writer that isn't read isn't a writer at all. Enjoy this e-book and enjoy your writing. I look forward to receiving and reading your submissions.



Gurmeet Mattu,  
Glasgow, Scotland  
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# MA2BOOKS

*Publishing For The People*



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## **DON'T BE A ONE-TRICK-PONY WRITER**

This is how it goes.

You want to be a writer. It burns at you and you've just got to do it. So you sweat blood and write a novel. You post it off to a publisher who sits on it for months before sending it back with a stock rejection. Something like 'We enjoyed your writing very much, but our lists are currently full' or 'Current market conditions do not allow us to promote new writing'.

So you send it off to another publisher, and another, and another. And your spirits sink and your confidence is blown out off the water. Can you write at all? Or are you just plain rubbish?

Happened to me. Don't deny it. I was a mad science fiction fan and I was going to walk in the footsteps of Heinlein. Even had an agent who believed in me, but couldn't sell 'Such Lunatic Gods'. Great title, if nothing else.

But with my confidence crippled I quit. I wasn't a writer and never would be. It was just a mad impossible dream.

Until I heard a local radio station say they were looking for new comedy writers. Only thing was I'd never written comedy or for radio. But my script 'The Curse of Hitler's Moustache' was picked up by the station and all of a sudden my picture was in the newspapers. Somebody from a community arts group saw it and phoned me. Would I be interested in writing a play for their theatre group? But I'd never written a stage play, had hardly ever been to the theatre. But I wrote 'Citizen Singh', and 'Siege Mentality' and then 'Cowboys and Indians'. And the producer of my radio debut came back and said would I do a radio play, so I wrote 'Sick As a Parrot' and 'The Flirt' and 'These Magic Words'. And then I sold 'Cocoanuts' and 'Doc' to BBC Television and my screenplay 'Disciple' won an award.

And not one word of science fiction had hit the page. Not one starship, not one galactic empire, not one death ray. I'd found my niche, which was no niche at all.

Not that it was all plain sailing. Convinced after my early success that I was now a master comedy writer I wrote a comic novel 'The Stormer'. Which hit the brick wall just as fast as my previous SF work.

So I was a dramatist rather than a novelist. Doesn't suit me, I'm a writer and I like writing prose. But The Stormer failed in its incarnations as a radio and TV play before it eventually came up against an audience as a short stage play for 7:84 Theatre Company.

So, my message is this. As a writer, don't be a one-trick-pony. The minute your novel is off to the publishers, start working on the screenplay version; or, serialise it for a magazine; or convert it into a TV or radio play; or a stage play. Community theatres are always looking for new writing.

Don't get fixated on your own petty ambition. The important thing is not that you are, or are seen as, a novelist or whatever, but that your work sees the light of day. The work is king and deserves an audience, or it fails to have any purpose.

Now this is not an easy option I'm handing you here. Each media type has its own set of rules to follow and you will have to learn a huge range of new skills to take a piece of prose and turn it into a radio script or screenplay. Consider, for instance, that radio cannot have you declaring

that a character has entered the room. That must be conveyed in dialogue, but not so that it jars with what has gone previously.

Or that a community theatre will operate with a limited budget, meaning that your epic can only have three actors and two costume changes.

Every form is self-limiting. Even a movie screenplay demands that you take dialogue to the bone. The mantra being 'show it, don't tell it'.

Make these restrictions work for you. Don't get limited by your original expectations. Be a master of all forms and the markets for your work will expand enormously.

Me, I don't even read science fiction any more.

## ANALYSING THE ESKIMO

They say you can't, or shouldn't, analyse humour. That to analyse is to destroy. Be that as it may, what follows is a short look at a brief sketch I wrote for radio. I didn't set out with the aims I ultimately describe, only to write something funny, but if it helps anybody else who wants to get into comedy writing so much the better.

ESKIMO

(A howling Arctic wind is blowing.)

COMMENTATOR: (a fairly close relative of David Attenborough)

As we look across the icy wastes we see an age-old sight that typifies life here close to the North Pole. A lone figure beside a hole he has laboriously cut in the ice. Perched, harpoon in hand, waiting for the arrival of a seal that may provide him and his family with sustenance, clothing and warmth in this bleak desolation. Wrapped in a fur jacket, trousers, hood, boots and gloves, he seems unaffected by the elements, for he has truly adapted to his environment.

This is the Eskimo, or as he prefers to be called today, the Innuut.

ESKIMO: (shouting) Oy! Not me!

COMMENTATOR: What?

ESKIMO: I said, not me!

COMMENTATOR: What, you don't want to be called an Innuut?

ESKIMO: No. I want to be called Doris.

COMMENTATOR: Doris?

ESKIMO: Yeah. I'm a transvestite.

COMMENTATOR: A what?

ESKIMO: A transvestite. Fella that dresses up in women's clothes. That's why I'm wearing the wife's gear.

COMMENTATOR: Really ? But that's fascinating. Are there a lot of Eskimo transvestites?

ESKIMO: Dunno. Buggers all look the same to me.

END

If you didn't find that funny you're free to leave now, but if you did, let's have a look at why we find this tickles the funny bone.

The point I started with was - cultures which don't differentiate between the way the sexes dress couldn't possibly have transvestism. I'm no anthropologist but I don't see anybody getting a thrill from dressing in his normal everyday clothes. Eskimos fitted the bill for me, because there seems to be a dearth of Eskimo jokes. Blacks, blondes, Irish, Polish, they all get it in the neck, but the Eskimo escapes unscathed. It was time this was rectified.

So, the punchline was the fact that a transvestite Eskimo would look exactly like he always did. My problem was in relating a visual joke on radio. You may notice the lengths the Commentator goes to in describing the Eskimo's dress. This, of course, was to reinforce the listener's preconception, but for the same reason I would keep it in even if converting for TV.

The other device I use is in the Eskimo declaring that he doesn't want to be known as an Innuut. The listener immediately begins to think that the joke is leading toward some differentiation between Eskimo and Innuut and is surprised when the Eskimo switches play by saying he wants to be known as Doris. The listener then awaits some salacious detail which, alas, he is denied because as Doris admits, they all look the same.

As I said, this analysis comes after the event. Comedy writing, to my mind, is about coming up with a basic concept and then writing it till an opportunity for a punchline presents itself. You then edit extraneous material to get the pace you want. For instance the Commentator's description of the Eskimo at the ice hole is there for radio listeners but, again, I would keep it in for TV to set a tone and pace for the gag. Besides which, that's the way commentator's talk. This may not be the way other comedy writers do their business but it works for me. If the joke works for you, I'm getting there.



## DIALOGUE, SOUNDS GOOD

For the dramatist who writes to be heard rather than read, dialogue is of course vitally important. But it is amazing the number of writers who imagine that because they can converse, they can write convincing dialogue.

Dramatic dialogue is not written conversation, as any reality tape recording will prove.

Conversation relies on gestures and visual hints, together with pauses for reflection and long periods of silence. Though the dramatist can include such reinforcement to increase the reality of his work, prolonged usage will prove excruciating to the audience. The art of successful dramatic dialogue is in the balance between the transmission of information and the dramatic effect it has.

Every piece of dialogue must have a purpose. Does it move the plot forward? Does it explain a character's motivation? Or the relationship between two characters? Characters in a drama cannot just chat, they must drive the drama forward in some fashion.

It is important too, that each character has a distinctive voice which differentiates him from the rest of the cast. These differences can come in many forms, accents, vocabulary range, pitch of voice, all valuable markers for the audience. Vital in radio writing, they are also useful in visual media because the audience can 'log on' to a character if he adequately delivers a well-written line. "The name's Bond, James Bond," carries authority and self-assurance even when delivered with Sean Connery's Scottish slur. Or perhaps because of it.

So how does the writer learn to write good dialogue? Of course he must listen, but with a writer's ear, and reading his written work is never going to be an adequate trial to assess the worth of his dialogue. It must be read aloud, preferably into a tape recorder and listened to with an objective ear. Get your partner to join in the fun and enjoy the experience. You might not be actors but you'll get a better sense of how it's going to sound to an audience. Eventually your ear will adjust and you can forego the pleasure of casting your beloved as a mass murderer, but until such time listening to your own work is a useful tool.

Try not to trip up actors with over-complex dialogue, they are simple folk and should be helped at all costs. Most importantly know the style of the people you are writing, the cockney barrow boy speaks much differently from the Montana cowboy but you must avoid clichés. Try having the cockney say 'Howdy'. Accents and dialects are useful but you can test the value of the dialogue by trying it in different styles. I was once paid to translate an English play into Scots dialect. This mainly consisted of turning 'your' into 'yer' but the Scots actors insisted on it as it made their job easier.

In listening to other people's speech patterns try to make a judgment call on the situation you are eavesdropping. Are these two lovers, Or two drunks about to come to blows?

Mastering dialogue puts you in the driving seat with opportunities in stage work, radio, TV and cinema. Remember the great lines, the great bits of dialogue you have heard. What made them work? Who said them? Where? Why?

If you can comfortably speak your own lines to a stranger without cringing, you're getting there.

## SEDUCING THE MUSE

So what muse am I talking about?

I'm talking about that goddess called inspiration, imagination and creativity, whose absence leaves many a talented writer gnashing his teeth and rending his garments. For me, my teeth remain ungnashed and my garments unrent, because I've never suffered from a lack of ideas for my work. Does this mean I've learnt to 'seduce the muse' or merely that I've learnt techniques to stimulate my creativity?

The answer is, both, because in the end run they mean exactly the same. Inspiration comes from the unconscious workings of the mind which we, by definition, can have no control over. However, there are a few tricks you can employ to stimulate the brain into making the neural connections that encourage great ideas.

I recall one of the earliest writing training textbooks I read, which encouraged the novice to carry about a notebook and jot down ideas, fragments of conversation and events, to eventually be blended and transformed into a fascinating novel. It seemed like a silly idea at the time and I never picked up the habit because in my head is the greatest tool for recording information known to man. And as this is the device that will be doing the blending, I think it best to get the information in there as rapidly as possible.

The brain performs this creative process at two points, as it enters and especially as it leaves dream (REM) sleep, when we enter the realm that self-hypnotists and those practising transcendental meditation try to reach. Everybody does it naturally, but few are aware of it. It is the time when the brain performs miracles, taking all its memories and creating something new from them. For most these fleeting images rapidly dilute to nothingness as we get into the business of the waking world, the brushing of teeth and the making of toast. But the writer must know that these fragmentary visions are worth their weight in gold. This is the place for the notebook, on the bedside table, not in your hip pocket. Write down these random imaginings because they're as creative as you're going to get.

So, how do we encourage this process or seduce the muse? There is nothing particularly clever about it, one must live one's life as normal, experiencing as much as is possible. Eating, drinking, talking, reading, watching, listening, travelling, making love, getting drunk, climbing, diving, skiing, fishing, flying, swimming, you get the idea, you have to live life to feed your brain. As an old editor of mine used to say, 'it's all grist to the mill'.

I've played about with self-hypnosis and it does help me to relax and reach a creative plateau, but whether it's entirely necessary I'm not too sure. It's quite easy to do, just sit comfortably, close your eyes, breathe regularly and count down as you become more and more relaxed. It takes practice but eventually you will reach a point where you're not really awake or asleep. Magic happens there.

You must remain aware of the process and prepared to note down what you have created, much material is lost in this transition between states, but what remains can be outstanding.

So, seducing the muse is easy. If only women were.

## WE CAN WRITE HEROES

Epic characters remain in the mind long after the novel is put down.

They must have qualities which raise them above the mundane, skills and abilities which ensure that their actions are not only heroic but memorably so. Characters such as these are surely easy to write but, in fact, are incredibly hard.

The truth is that our epic heroes must be rooted in humanity, otherwise the reader not only dislikes them but may end up hating them. Not a good position for a protagonist.

So, which vulnerabilities can we give our superman (or woman)?

TV detectives of the 70s revelled in this. One has only to remember Ironside in his wheelchair or Cannon with his girth. But in those cases the heroes disabilities were pushed almost as their *raison d'être* and that's not what I'm looking for. I want a hero who suffers from human frailties, yet rises above them. Comic book heroes are basically built on this premise. The civilian alter ego is almost always meek and mild-mannered, and I've always had an itch to write a character who was a loud-mouthed, belligerent oaf in real life, yet transformed into a zen Buddhist in a phone box when uttering a magical word. Never quite resolved how I'd make it work, but I continue to dream.

Human frailties are legion, but we must choose one or more that captures our reader's sympathy. The frailty cannot be self-inflicted so an alcoholic hero doesn't work because most people believe alcoholism is brought upon themselves by the consumer.

Orphan status is good but Spiderman and Superman have that niche stitched up and lack of parents often leads to orphans being high achievers.

Loss of faculties is good. Blindness, deafness, loss of a limb, would all elicit sympathy, but for me they are a step too far. I want a man that can function normally in real life yet still have the capacity for heroic endeavour. A man with everyday problems such as a flat tyre on the car and bills to pay. Stan Lee played this brilliantly when he introduced Spiderman in Marvel comics. The newly empowered Peter Parker couldn't make a living in the costume because he didn't have a bank account in the name of Spiderman.

Anyway, we're digressing too far into the land of superheroes when our intention was to create an epic character who would appeal to the reader. So let's start with our basic man-in-the-street (that being his humanity) and look at what he would need to be epic. If we ignore superpowers we are left with a very limited range of attributes to choose from. Heroism is a given, our man must be the type who will leap into a situation when others hesitate. Perhaps his impulsiveness is one of his frailties. Physical strength is only relative, and there's always somebody bigger and stronger. Mental skill is better but poses a hard question of the writer, he has to be smarter than the protagonist and the antagonist to write about their conflict. Pass.

No, the epic character plays like this. During the day he has a mundane, physical job. He is married with two children and lives in a city apartment. But in the evening he dons a special costume and goes to a private room in his flat. Here, he uncovers the machine and works his magic. He has much to say, and he will be heard. For he has the power of words, which none can resist. Here he stands, he is the ultimate hero, the fiction writer.



## ON COMEDY WRITING

Dying is easy, comedy is hard.

Old adage and old thinking, invented by writers and performers who wanted greater kudos for a craft that was deemed to be less worthy because it dealt with the amusing.

Comedians, writers and performers, want to not only make people laugh but to be taken seriously as well.

They thought they were being linked back in time to village idiots and court jesters, buffoons and the lame-brained. It didn't matter how much they got paid, they still had to wear that damn hat with the bell on the end.

So they absolutely had to insist that comedy was such a difficult craft to master that only those verging on genius could achieve it.

Sorry, guys, don't buy it.

To write a comedy sketch all you need a combination of a situation, characters and dialogue, with a mix of at least one of the elements being ridiculous. Keep writing till you hit the punch-line and then edit back. Let's try it with a little bedroom conversation sketch.

BILL: So, how do you know Fred next door's got a bigger thingy than me?

JEAN: He showed me it.

BILL: What do you mean, he showed you it? Guys don't just go around showing their married-next-door- neighbour their thingy.

JEAN: Fred does, he's an exhibitionist. He says, if you've got it, flaunt it.

BILL: The dirty devil. Is it ..eh.. really big?

JEAN: Enormous.

BILL: What, length-wise or girth?

JEAN: Both. He's won prizes for it.

BILL: What do you mean 'prizes'?

JEAN: Trophies. Awards. There's an international organisation for men with big thingies, and they give out annual awards in various categories, Fred says.

BILL: He's having you on.

JEAN: He showed me it.

BILL: So you said.

JEAN: His prize! It's a big gold-plated thingy and it says 'Most Promising Newcomer'.

BILL: Oh, so he's not been in this club long?

JEAN: No, just since he was spotted. In a public toilet. That's how they do their recruiting.

BILL: He didn't try to ... you know ... when he was showing you ...?

JEAN: It's not sexual. It's all about aesthetic qualities.

BILL: Bollocks!

JEAN: That's a separate category.

BILL: He's just trying to get into your pants. I'm going round there to give him a hiding.

JEAN: Hey, just because Fred's proud of how well-endowed he is, and wanted me to see his thingy, and feel how smooth the skin .....

BILL: You touched it?

JEAN: How else was I supposed to experience the satin-like sheen?

BILL: Listen, I'm as broad-minded as the next guy, but I don't want you going next door and looking at Fred's thingy and touching it. It's .. it's .. unhygienic.

JEAN: You're jealous.

BILL: Yes. I admit it. I am. Green-eyed. (pause) I can't help it, but I really envy your facility for making friends, darling.

Okay, so maybe it's not worthy of an Emmy but then again at least I'm not ashamed of my jester's cap

## SMASHING WRITER'S BLOCK

In the first instance I'm not totally convinced that it exists. What other occupation would, for instance, allow you to cry off your labours because you literally (pun intended) couldn't do it. The short-order chef? The car mechanic? I might allow plumbers a blockage, but only in a sewer pipe.

No, it's only dilettante writers that get it and there's something far wrong there. When push comes to shove and you have to put bread on the table for your family, you'll write. Otherwise they starve and what greater motivation do you need?

I've been writing for over 25 years and, yes, I'll admit there are times when I haven't felt like it, when the well of creation ran dry. Times even when an escape to the pub was far preferable to sitting in front of a screen and begging the muse to return. But I never regarded it as writer's block, just my innate indolence. And I had strategies to combat it.

In my early days I used to write poetry and some of it I still have to this day. I'm not saying it was any good, just that it gave me a break away from the writing I had to do and allowed my brain to reset.

Latterly I've taken to silly writing, which is much more fun and much more effective in taking my mind off reality.

So, what's silly writing.

The best way to answer that is with a couple of examples. Bear with me...

Dear Adolf,

Get your scrawny little Austrian arse out of Poland, you little fascist dictator. If you don't you'll force me to set the might of the British Empire against you. Be warned, we have Spitfires and all sorts of clever weapons. The Royal Navy has a torpedo that can kill a Nazi at 4,000 paces providing there's a following wind. And Vera Lynn is taking singing lessons.

Yours,

Winston

Churchill,

Your threats do not impress me as we have the Atlantic Wall which was built with Teutonic efficiency and lots of cement. Your Vera Lynn torpedo with wind will have no effect on us. Leave us alone, you have your Empire, all we want is a little living room. A well appointed lounge would do.

Adolf

Get the idea? Or how about ...

Holmes sank to his knees and his long aquiline nose wrinkled with distaste.

"There has been a foul deed committed here, Watson."

"What do you mean, Holmes?"

"This bloodstain, it was not here yesterday when I examined this very room. And you know I conduct my investigations most thoroughly."

"It's mine. It was an accident."

"This blood is yours? I see no wounds"

"The girl was too rough with me. I told her not to use the steel-tipped whip."

"I must say, Watson, your penchant for sado-masochism will cause no end of trouble."

"She won't say anything, I gave her a shilling."

"Generous to a fault. I bought her silence for sixpence."

Maybe I'm weird but I always found writing nonsense a great way to get back on the straight and narrow. I doubt if it would work for everybody and maybe there are some among you who can't even do silly writing, but it's worth a try. I may do a collected silliness book one day.

So, no writer's block for me. When they chop off my hands so I can't type I shall dictate, and when I am struck mute I shall be forced to invent telepathy.

## CHARACTERS MAKE COMEDY

When you watch a sitcom on TV you're being conned. Because what you get is not a 'situation' comedy, but a 'character' comedy.

Characters drive comedy much more than situations and I'm going to use one example to explore this.

Our subject is going to be 3rd Rock From The Sun. To those who never saw the show it ran on NBC (BBC in the UK) between 1996 and 2001 and starred John Lithgow and Kristen Johnston. The premise was that a group of aliens were disguised as humans and sent to Earth (the 3rd Rock of the title) to learn about humanity.

My contention is that this science fiction concept could have been played in many ways, only one of them being comedy. For instance this concept could easily have merged into an X Files type of show, with humans trying to track down the infiltrators. Or perhaps a serious investigation into the foibles of humanity.

Luckily, and thankfully, the producers chose comedy, though the concept in itself was not new. Think of My Favourite Martian.

Our alien explorers consisted of the following. Dick Solomon (John Lithgow), was the High Commander and leader of the expedition. He played the role of the family provider and took the position of physics professor at Pendelton State University. Information officer Tommy (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) was given the body of a teenager and forced to enroll in high school, leaving security officer Sally (Kristen Johnston) to be the homemaker and communications officer Harry (French Stewart) to spend his life as either unemployed or in short-term jobs.

Each of these characters displayed specific and defining characteristics. Dick was bombastic, self opinionated, arrogant and petulant. Sally, though outwardly beautiful, was tough and macho. Tommy was the typically mixed up teenager and Harry was the oddball no-hoper. They were perfect American humans, but their lack of knowledge of the subtleties of human life led to many of the show's comedy moments. That could, genuinely, have been called 'situation' comedy.

But that is not what is remembered about the show, it is the characters. They overflowed with easily forgotten one-liners which only worked because they were rooted in the characters. This can easily be seen by trying to transpose a Dick line to any of the other characters. It just doesn't work. Similarly, Sally's unexplained lust for Officer Don, though hilarious, could never work for any of the others.

For the writer, therefore, it is important to recognise that character is much more important than situation when writing comedy. The Solomons, whether alien or not, could be exported to any time or place and still be funny. A situation could certainly be funny for a moment but a humorous character is timeless.

Every successful comedy rests on characters that make us laugh, and the better they are painted, allowing us to really know them, the funnier they can be.

As Dick Hilarious once told me, if in doubt, pick the guy with the funny name,

## HOW TO BE A PROFESSIONAL LIAR

It is a given that fiction is not fact. It is, in fact, not true. It is a lie, and I, as a fiction writer am a liar. People pay me for what I write and I am, therefore, a professional liar. There, I've admitted it.

Once the fiction writer does that he can start to enjoy it. He can stand at a bar and when asked by someone, "So, what do you do for a living?" he can reply with pride, "I tell lies."

There should be no shame in this, it is an honourable profession. Many fine men have been liars. Take Shakespeare, lauded today, but a terrible liar. That *A Midsummer's Night* he wrote, lies. Not a word of truth in it. And they gave Arthur Conan Doyle a knighthood for telling lies about some character called Sherlock Holmes. Some people have no shame.

I may not be in the same league as these dishonourable gentlemen, but I have tried my best to lie for my Queen and country. Yes, my screenplay, *Disciple*, about a Scots lad converting to Sikhism had not a whiff of truth in it; and stage play *Siege Mentality* was nothing but a tissue of lies. Come on, two Asian kids hold hostage the committee of the Commission for Ethnic Harmony but don't know what they want in order to release them? Did anybody really fall for that one?

I make no apologies, for my lies are blatant, to be believed only by the terminally naïve, and this blatancy is hard to achieve. Take the efforts Ian Fleming put into ensuring that James Bond was not to be believed as a secret agent. How much more obvious can you be than to introduce yourself as, "Bond, James Bond."

Come on, Jimmy, if you'd announced yourself as Millicent Flanagan it might have thrown the bad guys off the scent for a while. But a stroke of genius from Fleming.

Let us celebrate the great liars for the pleasure they have given us. When has a computer manual elicited such joy as an utter fib? When has a recipe book been turned into a major motion picture?

It is encouraging that so many great liars have existed for we are discouraged from the practice as children. This denies future generations of many great lies. Some poor child, stigmatised by her teacher to tell the truth, will go on to become a botanist, thus denying us her wonderful tales of a boy wizard.

But the liar must declare himself, there is no honour in being a secret liar or as they are commonly known, a politician. If politicians had any sound beliefs in the lies they peddle they would work harder on character, plot and dialogue. I regard them as mere amateurs, who give us masters of falsehood a bad name.

These are the most truthful words I've written for a long time and, surprisingly, they give me a certain guilty pleasure.



## WRITING A GAG

Okay, let's write a joke.

First, set-up, either ridiculous situation or ridiculous characters. So ...

Man stands at a bus stop wearing a balaclava helmet on a very hot day.

(Sounds promising.)

He is approached by another man, who asks, "Why are you wearing that balaclava helmet when it's so hot?"

(Good, build up, and we need a straight man.)

"It helps to keep my ear plugs in," the first man replies.

(Slight escalation of ridiculous.)

"But why do you need ear plugs?" the second man responds.

"They help me see the number of the bus."

(Double take.)

"How do ear plugs help you see?"

(Logical, pull back.)

"They help to concentrate the senses that are available. So, not being able to hear improves my eyesight."

(This, again makes a strange kind of sense, but I think I see a punch line coming. Do you?)

"That's fascinating. But you can hear me."

"Ah, but you're not a bus."

(Uh uh, think I'm off track here. It's funny, but not funny enough. Go back and try again, go back to where the second man says, "But you can hear me". That has to go. I need to up the ante.)

"That's a fascinating theory. So, if I covered your eyes it would improve your hearing?"

"I could hear a man coughing in Peru."

(This might be padding, which may prove necessary, but I can always edit it out later if it's unwanted.)

"And if I pinched your nose and stopped your sense of smell?"

(Haven't a clue where I'm going now.)

"It would improve my sense of touch."

(Oh oh, getting further and further away from a funny destination, I think.)

"But what good would that do you if you needed your sense of smell?"

"I wouldn't let you hold my nose, would I?"

(This is getting so lame. Why did I start? Maybe I should write a recipe for a curry instead. No, keep going. Oh God, I've got it!)

"And what if I cut off your vision, your hearing, your smell and your sense of touch and taste?"

"I'd burst out laughing."

"What? Why on Earth would you burst out laughing?"

“It would really sharpen my sense of humour.”

Not a classic perhaps, but not bad for sitting on the couch of a Saturday afternoon, with a laptop, watching the TV and waiting for the Euro 2008 football tournament to begin. Let’s put it all together and see what we’ve got.

Man stands at a bus stop wearing a balaclava helmet on a very hot day.

He is approached by another man, who asks, “Why are you wearing that balaclava helmet when it’s so hot?”

“It helps to keep my ear plugs in,” the first man replies.

“But why do you need ear plugs?” the second man responds.

“They help me see the number of the bus.”

“How do ear plugs help you see?”

“They help to concentrate the senses that are available. So, not being able to hear improves my eyesight.”

“That’s a fascinating theory. So, if I covered your eyes it would improve your hearing?”

“I could hear a man coughing in Peru.”

“And if I pinched your nose and stopped your sense of smell?”

“It would improve my sense of touch.”

“But what good would that do you if you needed your sense of smell?”

“I wouldn’t let you hold my nose, would I?”

“And what if I cut off your vision, your hearing, your smell and your sense of touch and taste?”

“I’d burst out laughing.”

“What? Why on Earth would you burst out laughing?”

“It would really sharpen my sense of humour.”

In the end run the joke only rests on what everybody takes as standard, that man has five senses, so it’s based on misdirection, but this is the basis of many a good joke. I could remove material, but the whole point of the misdirection method is to get the reader or listener into a pattern of thinking, before pulling the switch, so I think I’ll leave it in.

Don’t be afraid of writing comedy. The joke rarely leaps into your imagination fully formed. It has to be worked for. The punchline may not immediately present itself, but as I’ve shown in the process above (and this is not a deconstructed joke) just keep going. Maybe it isn’t a sense of humour which marks out comedy writers, but stamina.

## IVANHOE REVISITED

Read the following and praise the Lord that you did not write in the days of Sir Walter Scott.

“The eldest of these men had a stern, savage, and wild aspect. His garment was of the simplest form imaginable, being a close jacket with sleeves, composed of the tanned skin of some animal, on which the hair had been originally left, but which had been worn off in so many places, that it would have been difficult to distinguish from the patches that remained, to what creature the fur had belonged. This primeval vestment reached from the throat to the knees, and served at once all the usual purposes of body-clothing; there was no wider opening at the collar, than was necessary to admit the passage of the head, from which it may be inferred, that it was put on by slipping it over the head and shoulders, in the manner of a modern shirt, or ancient hauberk.

Sandals, bound with thongs made of boars’ hide, protected the feet, and a roll of thin leather was twined artificially round the legs, and, ascending above the calf, left the knees bare, like those of a Scottish Highlander. To make the jacket sit yet more close to the body, it was gathered at the middle by a broad leathern belt, secured by a brass buckle; to one side of which was attached a sort of scrip, and to the other a ram’s horn, accoutred with a mouthpiece, for the purpose of blowing. In the same belt was stuck one of those long, broad, sharp-pointed, and two-edged knives, with a buck’s-horn handle, which were fabricated in the neighbourhood, and bore even at this early period the name of a Sheffield whittle. The man had no covering upon his head, which was only defended by his own thick hair, matted and twisted together, and scorched by the influence of the sun into a rusty dark-red colour, forming a contrast with the overgrown beard upon his cheeks, which was rather of a yellow or amber hue. One part of his dress only remains, but it is too remarkable to be suppressed; it was a brass ring, resembling a dog’s collar, but without any opening, and soldered fast round his neck, so loose as to form no impediment to his breathing, yet so tight as to be incapable of being removed, excepting by the use of the file. On this singular gorget was engraved, in Saxon characters, an inscription of the following purport: Gurth, the son of Beowulph, is the born thrall of Cedric of Rotherwood.”

Four hundred and eleven words to describe a secondary character in the novel, Ivanhoe. I’ve written shorter novels!

But it raises an interesting point. Does our need for brevity in this modern day and age mean that we miss out on some of the colour and texture that Scott imbues his character with? Because, let’s face it, the above might make for an arduous read, but if one does actually read it, it paints a vivid and living character.

So, always ready to face any challenge on behalf of my readers, I decided to rewrite the description of Gurth, son of Beowulf, for a modern audience. It’s inevitable that I’m going to lose something, but will it be really important? You be the judge, I give you Gurth.

‘The older guy was a brutal looking type, his slip-over leather jacket worn to nothing, his pigskin sandals tied to his calves by strips of yet more leather. Round his waist was a wide belt, fastened by a brass buckle, at one hip a small wallet and at the other a ram’s horn complete with a mouthpiece for blowing. In the belt was stuck a knife, sharp and two-edged.

He was hatless, but that was no lack because his hair, thick and red, served to cover his head, though his shaggy beard was of a lighter hue.

What was most interesting was the brass ring, welded round his neck. It bore the legend, Gurth, son of Beowulf, is the slave of Cedric of Rotherwood.’

Not bad, got it down to a hundred and twenty four words without losing too much. Wouldn't want to meet either of these two characters up a dark alley though.

In reality I would never spend a sentence, never mind a paragraph or page to describe a character as he entered a story. I would spread the descriptive stuff in the form of adjectives or adverbs over a scene, so that by the end the reader had a picture as best as I could paint it. Over and above that, rather than mere description I would have his physical appearance revealed through the comments or thoughts of other characters. This whole process would, hopefully, be so subtle that the reader would pick up the picture without even knowing that the character had been described.

The point is that Sir Walter Scott's audience differed greatly from that of the modern writer. The modern audience is well versed in imagining and doesn't require the layers of information that Scott needs to give us. We are so accustomed to the stereotypical that the phrase 'An Irishman walked into a bar...' immediately conjures up images that no amount of description could do justice to.

Should the writer, then, rely, on such shorthand in his description? This, I believe, depends entirely on what is being described. 'An old dockside bar' may be adequate to set a minor scene, but where it is crucial to the plot it would require a great deal more detail. The same rule would apply to characters. Give them a bit of rein if the description is vital to the tale, but rein in your descriptive powers when it isn't. Even the genre you write in will have to be factored in when deciding on descriptive length. Slower paced work can stand long descriptive passages, whereas fast paced work will come to a halt with a shudder. If in doubt I would over-describe in a first draft and then edit down in the rewriting.

Even though I still read the old stuff, and love it, I admit I cheat. Scott might not have been able to write tightly, but I can still skim.

## THE ORIGINS OF CREATIVE WRITING

How did creative writing begin?

Don't quote me on this, because it's not gospel.

Anyway, many years ago a little guy, let's call him Tom, who was homeless and hopeless, spent his time wandering from ancient village to ancient village, trying to scrape a living by selling his labour. But times were hard and Tom found himself on the brink of starvation when he arrived at Betaville one day.

The good folk of Betaville were in an uproar as they had heard of a terrible tragedy in Alphaville the previous week, but no-one knew the facts as no-one from Betaville had been to Alphaville for a while because it was a two day ride to Alphaville and Betaville's only ass was off her feed.

"But I've just come from Alphaville," Tom cried.

"Really?" the townsfolk said, "Tell us what happened."

"It was the blacksmith, old Fergus," Tom said, "He was wild with drink and murdered two men and hurt a goat."

"Tragedy!" the townsfolk intoned and crowded round Tom for further details, which he was happy to supply. He talked long into the night and when he ended there were many offers of food, drink and a bed for the night. Tom was delighted.

The next day Tom travelled on to Gammaville and immediately announced that there had been a great tragedy in Alphaville.

"What," said the remote inhabitants of Gammaville, "We never heard about that."

"It's true," Tom insisted, and retold the story as he had told it in Betaville. The residents of Gammaville were as entranced as their neighbours, and once again Tom was plied with hospitality. This is a bit of alright, Tom thought.

The next day Tom moved on to Fourville, which was so named because my knowledge of Greek is rubbish.

"Four men murdered in Alphaville," he shouted, "A goat hurt and three virgins pregnant."

"Never," said the residents of Fourville, and Tom knew he was in trouble because it was well known that there never ever were three virgins in Alphaville at any one time.

"My mistake," he corrected himself, "Four men murdered, one goat hurt and three visiting virgins impregnated."

"Tell us more," they cried and Tom took the fateful step from a purveyor of news to a fully fledged storyteller.

"It happened like this ..." Tom began and as the ale flowed, the tale of Fergus the blacksmith grew to encompass a pack of barbarians, a sheepdog called Corky, the eating of a haycart, and the three virgins had been transformed into an entire nunnery.

But as he lay in his comfortable, and free, bed that night Tom worried that his memory not being what it was, it was more than likely that he would forget the true story and every version that derived from it. Best to write it down, he thought.

Centuries passed and Tom's work came to a cinema multiplex near you, which Tom had been paid millions of dollars to write down.

So, learn my dear budding writers, if Tom could do it, so can you.



## WRITING A COMEDY SCREENPLAY

Isn't it funny how the court jester has become the superhero of the entertainment world. Yes, the comedian, the funny man, has surpassed the movie star or rock musician in the popularity league. Think of the likes of John Cleese, Steve Martin or Woody Allen and you are seeing writer/actors that people aspire to be. A far cry from the local fool or village idiot.

So what drives people to comedy? Many comedians have told of how, as youngsters, they used comedy to defuse potentially violent encounters. But surely not all comedy geniuses sprang from the ranks of the bullied. To my mind the comedy impulse operates on a much simpler basis, the need to be liked. We court popularity by giving people the safe, non-addictive, drug of laughter.

But that's not what this article is about, it's about writing comedy screenplays, which is a much harder proposition than writing gags. You'll note that the three stalwarts named above gained their greatest honours with movies. They may have started out as gag writers, but ultimately the glittering prizes only come via the silver screen. Having said that I would encourage any novice screenwriter contemplating a screenplay to master the short form first.

The relationship between a gag or joke and a full length screenplay is a strange one. I personally like the Monty Python methodology of stringing sketches along a comedic plotline, but a character telling a joke does not make your movie a comedy. The comedy must from the start be in your basic plot. Around your daft situation your characters can become involved in humorous situations and say funny things, as long as they are moving the plot forward. A useful rule of thumb which I learned when writing sit-coms was that there were only three reasons for a line of dialogue to be in a comedy script. One, to move the plot forward; two, the set up line for a joke; and three, the punchline to a joke. Everything else is waffle and should be stripped out.

It is possible to take a favourite joke and mould it into your character's plotline, but you must ensure that the joints don't show. Does the situation fit in with the rest of the narrative? Would your character utter that punchline? Comedy is not a one-size fits all scenario.

Take for instance this joke -

A guy gets on a plane and finds himself sitting next to a beautiful woman. He strikes up a conversation and the woman tells him that she is a sex researcher. He is fascinated and asks her what she is researching.

"I'm looking into sexual myths," she says, "For instance it's believed that black men have the largest appendages of any race, whereas it's the native Americans who can claim that honour."

"Really," he says.

"Yes, and Italian men have a reputation as the world's greatest lovers, whereas it is actually Jewish men who are the most amorous. My name's Julie Crawford by the way, and you are ..."

He takes her proffered hand and replies without a blink, "Tonto Cohen."

Sorry if you've heard that one before, but the point I'm trying to make is that John Cleese couldn't use that line because it doesn't fit his screen persona, but it seems almost specifically written for Woody Allen's sexual neurotic.

In previous articles I've told how I write comedy sketches. Take a ridiculous situation and keep writing till you hit a punchline. Then go back and prune out the extraneous material. This method wouldn't work for an entire screenplay but would work if you regard the entirety of a 90 minute movie as consisting of 30 scenes or sketches. Your problem would be in keeping your sketches within the limits of your plot. And remember, not only must your screenplay have a

beginning, a middle and an end, but each sketch must have the same.

For me there's a greater satisfaction in writing comedy material than any other and I've tried most. Try it yourself, but remember that the competition is brutal.

Run titles.

## WRITING IN TONGUES

Listen then, my brothers and sisters, and I will tell thee of magic, of wondrous things and of ancient arts. I have much to tell, and all of interest to the seeker after wisdom, but mark this and mark it well, these skills are not for shallow men, but to make great those who would lead our humble race to greater things.

This then I tell to speed thee on thy quest, to place one's heart, one's very mind, into that of another, better to convey those things we wish to tell. For is it not known that our noble listeners do take amusement if the tale is told in many voices, rather than the pathetic squeaking of thy servant.

How then shall we, but made of clay, conduct this wondrous task, this work for godlings? It requires no runes or spells, I tell thee, and only the application of some simple practice.

But first, my brother and sisters, ye must know the one into whose skin you wish to climb, and this learning comes only from being in the company of thy victim, if I may so name him. Ye must gain knowledge from this closeness, and the more you cling the better shall be thy understanding. Note not only, my beloved friends, the tone of voice, but the turn of hem, for all things are of import in this matter.

Yeah, you gotta get to know the guy, but big style. Every little bit of him, what he eats, where he drinks, even things he don't know about himself. It's the only way to grab his voice. Sure you can imagine, you're some kinda creative writer, aintcha? Can't expect you to behave like no newshound and just tell what you see, but you gotta start with what you got. And what you got is a real live breathing human being, I hope, less he's a corpse, and you gotta watch out for his foibles. Foibles is important, cause they's what makes a guy the guy he is. Foibles is everything, from the cut of his suit, to the smell of his aftershave. The size of his wife's butt to where he buys his automobiles. I aint kidding, the more you got, the better you'll know your man. Don't mean you have to put all that stuff on the page, just keep it in your head and the knowing will make your fella a more rounded and believable kinda guy.

For believability is the essence of our work. If we fail to convince the reader of the reality of the existence of our character then the whole dramatic experience is minimised if not totally destroyed. The reader's needs must be regarded as paramount, surpassing even the writer's desire to express herself in a voice she regards as totally her own. I'm sure I read an adage once about 'knowing thy enemy', not that I dwell upon such things, but similarly the writer must know the character she is writing. It is of no use to write of an African princess if one has no knowledge of how such a person exists. The honest writer will take her pencil and notebook in hand and research that existence. I do not of course expect her to travel to the dark continent in order to discover such truths, that would require too much of even the most generous of husbands, but in this modern age there are many public libraries where information on such matters is freely available. I would strongly urge every writer to learn the manners of the people she wishes to write if she wishes to speak in their voice.

## PLANNING YOUR WRITING

It goes against every grain in your body. You got into this game to be a creative writer. You were inspired, touched by genius, immortal, and now I tell you to plan your writing and work from a blueprint.

Sorry, pal, but that's the way it is, especially if you want to be a professional writer. That is, somebody who gets paid cash money for writing. You don't see a tycoon going into a new venture without a business plan, and you won't see a general going to war without a battle plan, so it seems like common sense to do a little planning before you write your masterpiece.

It won't stunt your creativity, believe me, because I've used the method and no matter how tightly I pre-planned, my creativity kicked in and what I ended up with would invariably veer away from where it was meant to go. Either that or the characters took on a life of their own and took me where they wanted to go.

I didn't fight it and you shouldn't either, the plan is not there to act as a straitjacket, but as a guide if you run out of steam. Most unfinished novels end up that way because the writer didn't plan them to their conclusion. If you find your narrative going astray you have the choice of working to get it back on track or running with it for a while and seeing where you end up. You might end up in a blind alley, but at least you'll know how to reverse your course.

Remember that the plan is not set in stone. You can go back to it in the middle of writing your novel, when the hero has run off with his sister in law, rather than the librarian, as you'd predicted, and change the plan. Keep both versions, the swine might take the notion for a book again, making you revert to your original intention.

So, what should a basic Writing Plan contain? I've given a quick example below. How elaborate you want to be is up to you, especially in the descriptive sections. I would recommend you over-write here, and edit down for what you actually put in your piece. I tend to write, at most, a couple of sentences for each plotting element.

### PROJECT INFO

TITLE:

WRITER:

MEDIA (novel, screenplay etc.):

GENRE (comedy, romance etc.):

LENGTH (short, full):

SHORT SYNOPSIS (100 words):

### CHARACTERS

#### PROTAGONIST

NAME:

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

CHARACTER:

#### ANTAGONIST:

NAME:

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

CHARACTER:

SECONDARY CHARACTERS

(1) NAME:

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

CHARACTER:

RELATIONSHIP:

(2) NAME:

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

CHARACTER:

RELATIONSHIP:

(3) NAME:

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

CHARACTER:

RELATIONSHIP:

SETTING

WHEN:

WHERE:

FULL SYNOPSIS (500 words)-

FIRST ACT (beginning):

SECOND ACT (middle):

THIRD ACT (end):

DEFINE YOUR CONFLICT (first act):

SECOND CONFLICT (if any):

DEFINE YOUR COMPLICATIONS (second act)

(1):

(2):

(3):

WHAT HAS YOUR PROTAGONIST LEARNED OR HOW HAS HE GROWN THROUGH YOUR STORY? (Try and get at least a paragraph for this):



## THE COMEDY CODE

I used to think that writing comedy was like writing itself. It either came naturally or not at all. Then I found that I had to be funny and the thought terrified me, because I was never the guy with the quip on his lips and a bag full of gags to drop into conversations.

It happened like this. I'd given up on writing because my science fiction novels weren't finding a publisher and my wife wanted to start a family so I had to find a steady job. It was while on this job, with my typewriter well hidden away, that I heard my local radio station announce that they were looking for comedy writers for a new series they were planning. I'd never written comedy before, but I wasn't going to miss an opportunity to write, so I duly delivered a 10 page script called The Curse of Hitler's Moustache.

The exact details escape me now, almost thirty years later, but I recall that it was about a Russian soldier who, on invading Berlin at the end of World War II, had discovered the moustache of the fascist dictator which had escaped being burnt. The moustache had been inherited by the soldier's son and, under its malevolent influence, he found himself unable to live in a Bolshevik society and planned to escape to the west. He was helped by a CIA agent called Steve Thrust, but beyond that I remember nothing, but I know that it made me laugh when I wrote it.

So, where did this comedy impulse come from?

I think, like the rest of humanity, that I enjoy a good laugh, but I always thought that those who made us laugh were a special breed, smarter, sharper, and way beyond my abilities. But I got picked for that radio comedy show and now had to put up or shut up. I was teamed up with comedy writers with a great deal more experience than myself and my confidence plunged. But, as we worked together I discovered that if I wasn't as sharp in the pub ping pong sessions, when we tried to crack each other up, I could produce just as good as them on paper. Because I'd keep working the joke till I hit the punchline.

The fact is that, first and foremost, they weren't writers, they were gagmen and there's a world of difference between the two. They had no sense of structure or pacing and couldn't see why I would put in a totally inconsequential line just to add to the build up to a punch line. I'm not saying they couldn't have learned, but they'd got by on their native wit for so long that they thought they could get away with it for ever. They were dinosaurs and couldn't evolve, no matter what I tried to tell them, I was the newbie. It seemed obvious to me that even slipping on a banana skin is funnier if we get to know the guy who's going to be doing the slipping first.

You don't need to be the sharpest tool in the box to be a comedy writer. You just need to be able to learn and to work. The ability to laugh qualifies you.

I went on to much greater things in my writing career. The other guys in that first writing team didn't.

## STORYBOARDING

Once, while writing a screenplay, I got into a bit of a tight spot and recalled that many movie directors used storyboards to get a visual feel from their screenplay. I thought this might be a useful tool to employ in my own predicament and decided to give it a try. On the PC I drew two rectangles per page and printed off a pile of them.

It was then I remembered that I couldn't draw, but this didn't deter me. I could manage basic cartoonish characters and knew enough about perspective to have them within a 3D room. That was all I needed. Being able to visualise the characters I was writing about freed me from my doubts and helped with action and movement. In fact I could have done it with matchstick characters.

Later, I wondered if this same process could be brought to other writing and there seemed no reason why not. So I consequently took to storyboarding prose, stage plays and even radio productions. The method helped me immensely.

I've always been a visual person and often cut out and keep people's faces from newspapers and magazines. These are useful when matching up a character's description to a face. Because of this I tend to avoid well known faces such as actors or sports people because their faces carry too much baggage. In an ideal world I will have forgotten who the character was by the time I come to use them and they are only cast because their face fits the image of the character I already had in my mind.

With storyboarding the method I use is to imagine the scene from my POV (point of view) as I usually write in the third person. I try to imagine how I would visualise this scene appearing on a cinema screen or a theatre stage. What are the important elements? Is character placement important?

Below the drawing I will write a 'scene' number, a location, the characters involved, the action that is taking place and brief dialogue, if important. This may seem a long drawn-out process which takes me away from writing but, as any writer knows, such diversions are more than welcome. I take a break from writing, while still working on it. If I could actually draw I'd sell the drawings too but, alas, limited as I am that option is beyond me. For someone who is a skilled writer and artist this could be a great cash cow.

This method may not be effective for writers who are less visually dependent than I am, but it is useful, if only to recall where you left the body in your murder mystery.

## THE SHORTEST STORY EVER TOLD

Ernest Hemingway, as a young newspaperman in the 1920s, bet his colleagues \$10 that he could write a complete story in just six words.

He won the cash with this: "For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn."

As an example of brevity this is unsurpassed, but is it actually a story? Does it fulfil all the rules of drama which I tend to harp on about?

Admittedly there is no plot, no structure, no protagonist or antagonist, but this is a story because it evokes an emotional response in the reader, and that is the prime aim in creative writing.

What Hemingway does, and in a masterful way, is leave out everything apart from those words which are going to trigger emotions and leave the reader to fill in the story. It's a cheat, but a brilliant one. His story doesn't answer questions, it poses them, and the main one screams 'What happened to the baby?'

What happened to this baby for whom shoes were bought but which are not now required? Why would a baby no longer require shoes? The responses all seem tragic, death, illness, kidnapping, every one a parent's nightmare. The parents then, or those who placed the advertisement, are the protagonists. The antagonist is unknown, the question of what took the baby. By the time we get to the story it is over and we are left to use our own imaginations to fill in the pieces. We must create, in our own heads, the beginning, middle and probably tragic end.

But is this the only conclusion one can draw? I tried to think up alternatives and they are admittedly weak. A drug addict parent buys the shoes, but then sells them when his craving becomes too much. Possible, but the gap between advertising the shoes and getting any money for them to buy the drugs would seem too great. Another option is if the shoes were bought as some kind of practical joke and, having fulfilled that purpose, are no longer required. This could be plausible but stretches credibility, because the poignancy of those six words is lost. Hemingway didn't make them 'baby' shoes for no reason.

Each word here is carefully chosen, and especially the last two. 'Hardly' worn doesn't do it, and neither does 'unworn' though it would have served to reduce the story to five words. That word 'never' is the key, because it is like a lament for what will 'never' be.

Like the competent director of a horror movie, Hemingway does not show us his monster, he leaves it to our imaginations, and there is a lesson for us all here. Less is, indeed, more. Finding the balance between what exposition to give the reader and how much to conceal places the writer in as precarious a position as any tightrope walker.

I've always advocated rewriting and brutal editing of your own work. All superfluous words should be jettisoned as soon as possible. Hemingway takes my credo to the limit.

## INTROS POSE QUESTIONS

Writing a great introduction to your work is important, drawing the reader, listener or viewer into your world and, alas, 'Once upon a time' just isn't enough anymore. The modern audience expect more and this is where the TV series writer has it easiest, because his audience are already aware of his characters and general situation, allowing him time to create a pre-credit teaser where he can nail this week's conflict in a few quick scenes.

For most others it is a much more difficult procedure, this need to impart a vast quantity of information as quickly as possible, while retaining some element of style. It is the sure sign of the novice writer that he begins with a descriptive passage such as- 'The dark clouds gathered on that moonless night and a strong, cold wind blew sharply through her thin dress'.

Who cares? Not me, and I'd probably stop reading right there, and the poor gal could freeze to death for all I cared. The writer has failed to 'hook' me and that primary failing derives from his need to prove to me that he can write, rather than my need to be entertained.

The primary rules for your story are this - start as close to your end as possible because compression is good. Later, you can scatter information on what proceeded throughout your narrative, but don't start way back because you want to set your scene or explain your characters. That should come through your skill in interweaving these elements into your dramatic action. Get to the conflict as fast as possible, that's what an audience wants, to know what the problem is, so that they can engage their brains in how to solve it. From the very start you should be asking your audience questions, perhaps not directly, but creating in them the desire to need to know more.

Admittedly the audience do allow the writer a certain amount of leeway or honeymoon period where they suspend their judgement and this is certainly true in film where visuals can deliver information and set a scene before the narrative proper starts. But the impetus for the writer must always be the same, grab the reader and hang on to him.

On rereading the above I think I should clarify the statement '... you should be asking your audience questions ...' because what I actually mean is, make the audience ask you questions. Questions such as 'who is this?', 'why is she doing that?' and most importantly 'what happens next?'. If you do that you've hooked your fish and all you have to do is reel them in.

So, what kind of opening would serve this purpose? We always presuppose a certain amount of knowledge on our audience's part so we must use this. Every word is loaded with significance. For instance 'the princess' paints a certain picture, while 'the general' paints another, the audience already has an idea of who and what these characters are and so I don't need to immediately begin describing them in detail, that will come later.

But to open with a line such as 'The general placed an unfatherly hand on the princess's knee' paints pictures of lecherous old military men and beautiful and attractive young princesses in only 10 words, because I'm playing on preconceptions. I then have the option of playing to them further by having my elderly military gentleman slide his hand up her leg, or find some other reason for his inappropriate behaviour. Is he brushing off a venomous spider? Is he passing on a secret message from the princess's lover? You don't know, but you want to.

To conclude, the information you give in your introduction must hook the audience, but because

you do not have a huge number of words to use for this purpose, use stock characters, ideas and perhaps even situations as a form of shorthand to get your drama moving. Force the audience to ask you questions and as you're the only one with the answers you're heading for a little omnipotence.



## SELF-PUBLISHING WITHOUT SHAME

Why does self-publishing carry such a stigma?

Because the writer feels that it proves that his work is not worthy of being picked up by a publisher and he is forced into publishing himself. He feels he is accused of vanity publishing, but just submitting your book to a mainstream publisher shows some signs of an ego which is actually necessary for a writer.

This scenario is flawed and is about to be blown out of the water.

Let's accept that publishers are commercial businesses run to make the owners money. They are not in the business of promoting good writing. You, as the writer, are asking them to invest a significant amount of money in paying you an advance, editing and printing your book and ultimately marketing, advertising and distributing it. They have no guarantees of any return on their investment and are therefore loathe to take many chances. The fact that any book at all is published is a miracle.

But look at the other side of the coin. Publishers only came into existence because the costs of printing and distribution were beyond the means of the average writer. If those costs were affordable the need for publishers would disappear and everyone would self publish. That day, if not quite here, is fast approaching.

Let's look at this for a possible method.

A writer could create his book on a PC.

He converts it into a pdf file.

He creates a website to sell the book as a download.

He promotes the website through Adwords or article sites.

Total cost, less than £100 and not one publisher in sight, and the writer gets every penny that his sales generate, even though he must charge significantly less than a print book. The arithmetic is simple, if your total costs were £100, you'd need to sell only 40 books at £2.50 to break even. Can you sell 40 books?

The flaws in this system are that the reading public is not quite ready for reading from a screen (though this will come) and always have the choice to print the book; that the writer might not have the knowledge to convert to pdf or build a website, but these skills can be learned or bought in; and may not have the skills to promote themselves, their work or their website.

These flaws are minor. If a reader chose to print out a 200 page pdf file it would cost approximately £2 including black ink and paper. Conversion to pdf is easily done with free software available on the net. Building a simple website is not nearly as difficult as some people may believe and free software is available which means you don't need to code html. Harder is promoting your work. My advice would be to start local - issue a press release to your local paper, give a reading at your local library or to a writer's group, stuff like that. Give away a free sample chapter from your website. You have to be creative, but that's your ballgame, isn't it?

On another tack, this issue of vanity publishing is a western concept and this is something I only realised relatively recently. My father came from rural farming stock in the Punjab region of India. He came to the UK and made a living driving buses before graduating to the retail and catering markets. But, throughout his life he retained a love of writing and especially poetry in his native Punjabi or Urdu. When he retired he bought a PC and got appropriate fonts so that he

could fulfil his passion. When he had written enough he told me he was going to get a book published. ‘Oh yeah,’ said I, the seasoned writer (who he never encouraged, by the way, because writing was a hobby not a way of life) ‘It’s not that easy to get published, Dad.’”

It didn’t faze him one little bit. He printed off his stuff and posted it away to a relative in India with orders to get him a 1,000 copies printed and bound, these services being so much cheaper over there. And they duly arrived, crates of them, my father’s published book.

My father didn’t get it, my disquiet at his self publishing, this display of vanity. He had written his book, he had paid for it to be printed and bound, it belonged to him. He would give copies to family and friends, donate copies to libraries, if somebody wanted to buy a copy, fine. His name would live.

And isn’t that, really, the reason that we write?

## A NOVEL APPROACH

Okay, writing a novel is a big deal. It's going to take you at least a couple of months and probably a lot more. You've been told and told that you have to get ahead of the game by planning your piece. Start off with your great idea, set up your three acts, define your characters, your protagonist and antagonist, decide your locations, your style, there's just so much to do before you even start writing.

By the time you get to your art the buzz has gone and you wonder why you even bothered.

Okay, here's a secret, you don't have to do it that way. By all means, take your great idea and start putting words on paper right away. And very quickly you'll run out of steam. And that's where all the unfinished novels lying in drawers come from. Because, if you start off without a plan you're going to have nowhere to go once the rush is over.

Now, some writers swear by setting everything in stone before they start writing, but I'm too human for that approach. I need to catch the tide and get words down as fast as possible. But I know that at some point I'm going to have to get down to the drudgery of pinning down each character's story arc, writing at least a thumbnail sketch for every character, research location and period. But knowing that allows me the freedom to let my imagination run free and I know the further I go, the more material I'm going to have to go back and re-edit once I've got my structure down, so I don't go too far.

This was really necessary in the olden days when I worked with a portable typewriter and carbon copies. Editing meant retyping the whole opus, so you knew you had to get it right. Now, with 'Go to Page', 'Find' and 'Cut & paste' the writer has it easy because the word processing has taken a lot of the drudgery out of writing. Remember that the next time you curse the technology. Nowadays you can define how far you want to go before you take breath to go back and edit. And edit is what you must do, it is ultimately in editing that the art of writing exists. The formula is write, edit and polish. At that point you can relax, satisfied, or you can go back and edit again. But be aware that you're never going to be totally satisfied with what you've written. There's always going to be some lingering doubt about pace or style or whatever, but you just have to learn to accept it.

So, those are your three options. Attack at speed and eventually run out of steam. Plan totally and run out of inspiration. Or attack gently and be prepared to go back and plan at some point. I think the best method seems obvious. The third uses your imagination while it shines brightest and still insists that the nuts and bolts are kept in mind.

Of course you could be one of those supremely talented geniuses who can simply run your stream-of-consciousness novel straight onto the page. My congratulations, but one question, why are you reading this?

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ...

Some people think it's easy, being a comedy writer. Reckon you wake up in the morning with a smile on your lips and a killer quip to put the wife in her place. But life's not like that; for one thing the wife left you for an undertaker a year ago, she appreciated your comedy lifestyle so much. For another, trying to be funny for a living doesn't give a man the deep career satisfaction of the sewage worker or the acting credentials of the average professional wrestler.

The problem is that there's a certain magic involved in crafting humour and the writer lives in dread of the moment it might vanish, never to reappear. He doesn't know where it ever came from and he can't just go to the comedy station and fill up his tank again. At least when writing action scenes he can bring in a stunt writer, but with comedy there can be no substitutes.

So he brushes his teeth and drowns his hangover in coffee before switching on the computer and remembering that he hasn't washed the car since yesterday and no self-respecting comedy writer would be seen dead in a dirty car. So he goes out and washes the car and the neighbour's as well because, well, Butch isn't such a bad guy. And that effectively takes up the morning and his stomach rumbles and he remembers he never really had any breakfast, he was so eager to start work on this new script, the deadline was only last week.

What shall it be for lunch, then? Something Greek, perhaps? Humous and pitta bread? Or Italian. Pasta with chicken in a garlic sauce? Or why not push the boat out and cook some Lebanese lamb kebabs and have them with a Mediterranean salad?

He has a ham sandwich, which finishes off the loaf and just as well because it was about to do that chameleon thing and change colour. But he slumps in front of the TV anyway and what do you know there's a documentary about the sex life of gnats on Discovery and he'd always wondered with that ever questing mind of his how gnats managed such things.

With lunch over he finally makes it to the keyboard and checks his email and discovers that he has more friends in his spam folder than in his address book. But the machines running slow and obviously needs a defrag and probably a virus scan as well and he can't possibly write with all these processes running because that would slow everything down to an utter stop. So, with a huge effort, he drags himself away from the computer and wonders what his friends are doing. The idiots won't be in the pub because they all work stupid nine to five jobs which bring them in regular salaries.

But it's worth a long shot so he grabs his mobile phone and fires off text messages to all and sundry announcing that he is available for drink and debauchery, or as he justifies it, research and development. And, guess what, Doug responds, he's on a half day and he's in the bar. Should he, or shouldn't he? He can't work, the computers out of action and there's nothing pressing in the house, apart from the ironing that needs done and that bad pun convinces him. He's not on form, the magic has deserted him. With luck it will return tomorrow and he will write till his fingers bleed.

In the pub Doug greets him with, "Get much done today?"

And our man replies, "It's not just about the writing. To get output you need input. Mine's a whisky."

# COMPLETE CREATIVE WRITING COURSE

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## INTRODUCTION

Is the pen mightier than the sword? Can words have so much power?

Consider the Bible, the Koran, Das Kapital, The Wealth of Nations. Only words, and yet they have moved nations and destroyed empires. Words are powerful beasts and the ability to control them makes the writer extremely powerful. If you are a writer you are a dangerous entity. If you are a good writer you are a positive menace. But just as anybody can wield a sword, not everybody can be a master swordsman, and not everybody can be a great writer. But with instruction and practice you can improve your skill.

So, this creative writing course doesn't teach you how to write, it teaches you how to be a better writer.

Welcome to an adventure I hope you'll find enjoyable as well as educational. The aim is to take your innate talent and teach you some skills and techniques that will make you a more confident writer. Remember that word, confidence. I can't make you a great writer and I certainly can't guarantee that you will be a great success, but I can promise that if you take on board what I give you in these pages you will be a much more rounded writer and one that is not afraid to tackle any subject in any format and thrust it in front of any audience - a confident writer.

The 14 informational Modules are structured, but in a fairly loose way and you will be subject to my digressions at points. Bear with me on this, everything has a point, if only in letting you get to know me better. The Modules vary in length, but all are equally important in building your skill set. Take your time and try to absorb what I'm trying to tell you and why. If you put up barriers against learning you can't expect to gain anything from the Course.

Performing the Exercises is not mandatory but I'd recommend that you have a crack at them. Reading what I write is easy, but doing the Exercises gets your mind working on a different plane and builds good habits. There may be points where you think I'm stating the obvious or, alternatively, that I'm being over complex, but this is inevitable with the nature of this Course. I have no way of knowing at what stage in your writing career you are, or even how bright you are. A certain level of intelligence is no doubt necessary for any writer but the art of writing is such a broad church that genius status is not required to achieve. I'm proof of that.

The final Module is the Tasks and you should really be able to tackle these by that point. Enjoy the process, it's the best way to learn.

## MODULE 1 (Non-Fiction or News Writing)

Why non-fiction?

Because if you learn to master the art of writing or reporting on reality you'll find the creation of fiction much easier.

Having said that the journalist or reporter is rarely a writer. They act more as detectives, gathering information which is then collated into readable prose by sub-editors. We all learn to write as very young children, but somehow many never manage to master the techniques of producing basic understandable prose which transmits the writer's message clearly and concisely. Any brief browse round the internet will prove that. Websites abound with grammatical and spelling errors and yet one assumes that those who post this material are at least computer literate.

So what differentiates writers from non-writers? Writers write and non-writers don't. Seems simple, but in writing, the competent writer learns and enhances his ability.

You can too.

I'm not here to teach basic spelling or grammar, that's a task you must assume yourself. The only comment I'll make is – don't trust spellcheckers because they know nothing of context. To them 'their' and 'there' are both correct spellings, but only in the correct place. By all means run a spellcheck over your material for glaring errors. But you must do a personal check to pick up what the machine's missed.

So, let's get to it.

The first thing the young journalist is taught is how to structure a news story. Remember that word 'structure', you'll be reading it a lot.

Here are some facts -

Johnny Wilson is dead.

His mother is divorced from his father.

They live in the Kingston area.

The bus was traveling at forty miles per hour.

Johnny was 11 years old.

Johnny's mother's name is Kathleen.

The accident happened at 11.15.

Mrs Wilson has two other children.

The driver of the bus was Mr Abdul Kareem.

There was snow and ice on the road.

There were no witnesses to the accident.

Johnny was going to the local shops.

The bus skidded at the corner of Hearn Street and Forest Avenue.

Sgt. Thomas of the local police said "Our enquiries are continuing. No one has been charged."

Mrs Wilson works in a local factory.

Let's turn this into a brief news story, suitable for a local newspaper, using the following formula-

What happened?

Who did it happen to?

Where did it happen?

When did it happen?

How did it happen?

Why did it happen?

We should end up with something like this.



An 11 year old boy was killed by a skidding bus at the corner of Hearn Street and Forest Avenue yesterday morning.

The boy was named as Johnny Wilson who lives locally. He is survived by his mother and two sisters.

Johnny was visiting the local shops when the bus, driven by Mr Abdul Kareem, seemed to skid on the icy roads and hit the boy. The local police are investigating the accident.

That transmits the vital information of this tragic accident by a simple process of editing. Follow up stories may well dwell on Mrs Wilson's divorced state and her occupation in a factory, but at the moment they are irrelevant.

I'm telling you this because good writing is not writing it's rewriting, or editing. If you can't take your raw material and structure it you're wasting your time. Admittedly, anyone reading the basic facts as given above would have been able to establish the events, but the writer makes it easier by turning them into an easily digestible narrative. The same principle is used by fiction writers, but in their case to generate an emotional response, whether terror, humour or whatever.

And these same principles apply to all writing in spades. Burn this into your brain –  
**STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE !!!**

But we must carry this theory of structure down a level into the very paragraphs and sentences your prose consists of. And if you think that's carrying structure a little too far, be glad we're not structuring individual words.

Don't look upon structure as your enemy, claiming that the creative muse is stifled by such constraints. Let it help you in developing your argument by submitting your material to analysis.

You're better doing the analysis yourself and finding the flaws before somebody else does it for you and saddles you with unwanted criticism.

Imagine the events in your story actually happened in real life and were to be reported in a newspaper. How would it read? I'm asking you to get involved in a process of reverse engineering, where the news story comes before the 'events'. Having created the structure with the news story, your fiction should then just require you to fill in some extra details (and some flair!).

If this sounds too mechanical, don't worry too much. I'm only putting you through this because you have to learn to walk before you can run. Once this process becomes second nature you will be not only able to run, but fly.

To take the news-writing analogy one step further I want you to step into the world of the TV news reporter to help with your visual sense.

Filming of the actual event would be brief and distressing but the reporter, without access to this, has to set a scene and convey information and an impression.

Nowadays TV news crews are fairly small units and the reporter will instruct the cameraman on what shots he wants. Let's work this:

Opening shot - Reporter direct to camera.

2. Cut to: Bus

3. Cut to: road junction
4. Cut to: Interview with mother
5. Cut to: Interview with policeman

Closing shot - Still photograph of victim

This is a fairly traditional format and conveys the story the reporter wants to tell. It passes no comment, because that is not the reporter's job.

You, as a fiction writer, may question whether the boy had been sniffing glue, or whether he was shoved in front of the bus by one of his friends, playing a daredevil game. Of such things are fiction born.

It's also a nice hook to present your story with a bare news report and then subject it to analysis as it opens up and other facts emerge. This is particularly useful in crime fiction.

News, however, is not as impartial as it would have us believe. The old headline 'FOG IN CHANNEL, CONTINENT CUT OFF' tells us about the insularity of the English. Analysis of other news headlines tells us not only what happened, but also the socio-political views of the writer, his editor and publisher. All news is slanted and even the legendary impartiality of the BBC can be questioned if subjected to analysis. Some of the more honest journalists do attempt to be as objective as possible but human nature being what it is, personal bias cannot help but creep in.

You, as a fiction writer, have a choice in this matter. Do you espouse your own views or simply tell your tale?

You have to consider why you write and what the purpose of your writing is intended to be.

You have to consider the views of your readership. It's doubtful if anybody espousing fascist dictatorship, unless for comic effect, will find many readers.

I would imagine I'm a fairly left-wing, liberal kind of person but can I imagine the thought processes of a right-wing bigot? Because I can't write him unless I know him. I once interviewed Lord Chalfont who was a Labour MP who'd drifted right and was now promoting the lifting of sanctions against apartheid South Africa. I knew my argument was right, but he ate me up. He had the facts and he was ready. I wasn't.

But it taught me to prepare and know what my enemy knew. Whether Chalfont believed in what he said, I do not know, but he put it across with the skills he had gained from his years in politics. In the end run it didn't matter, he could have been an actor mouthing lines and I hadn't learnt my part.

Take the interviews with mother and policeman suggested above. They could be scripted because neither the mother or the cop are going to say anything sensational. They are going to mouth the platitudes they are expected to. Life is like that. Don't forget it, even in your wildest flights of fantasy.

## EXERCISES

Your Exercises for this Module are in 2 sections

(1) Go to the website of a major newspaper. Find a news story. Copy and paste it into your word processor. Now, in no more than 1,000 words, turn this news report into a short story. You are not permitted to change any of the basic facts, though you may create dialogue between characters. If the report does not come to a conclusion (eg verdict in a court case) you may invent one to give your story an ending.

(2) The Russians were first on the moon in 1969, beating the Americans. Write a 500 word (approx) news report detailing this achievement.

## MODULE 2 (Research & Analysis)

The fact that the writer must read is a given, to check out the opposition if nothing else. But the writer, in order to learn his craft, must also read with an analytical mind, avoiding the narrative's attractions so that he can see the methods the author has used in creating his piece. The best way to do this is to avoid reading what we enjoy - harsh, but unavoidable. Whatever type of fiction you're into, its joys are not for you for the moment. So, western readers, turn to science fiction, and romance fans to detective thrillers. Pick authors who are good and popular, though these may be contradictory.

What you're looking for is the techniques the writer has used. Ask yourself questions such as -

*What is the average sentence length?*

*Does the writer vary this by much?*

*How much description does he give when introducing a new character?*

*Does his dialogue flow?*

*Does he describe action well?*

*Do you get any sense of an 'act' opening and closing?*

Later, once you see what there is to be learned from such analysis you can return to your favourite authors and subject them to the same tests. You may be surprised at the results. You may find yourself wondering if that's all there is to writing, the application of formulaic techniques.

Thankfully, it is not, there is an art.

We are blessed in living in the age of the internet where research on any subject is almost laughably easy. I growl at the way what could have been a global library has become instead a global marketplace, but as a research tool the web beats trudging down to the library on a wet Tuesday hands down. Most of the classics are available on the Gutenberg Project. Track them down and delve into them, because every little you learn has value.

You'll note that I'm not giving you any links to follow to find this site. This is deliberate. That's what search engines are for, and research is an art form in itself and one you should get used to. It's going to help you write about being a spy in Istanbul when you failed the MI5 entrance exam and you've never been to Turkey.

It is imperative that you look at what other people write, whether it is in newspapers, magazines or books. Each publication, like every writer, has a different style and you must be able to identify them and ultimately copy them. Even comic books have a value. Someone had to sit down and write the captions and the contents of the speech balloons and that someone had to be a wordsmith of the first order, because space is extremely limited in a comic book panel which is going to be devoted mainly to the graphic.

Later, you should dig out some of your own writing and subject it to analysis. Has your writing improved over time? How? And why?

Okay, let's get down to as close to destructive testing as a writer can get without physically ripping a book apart. Note down the results.

Pick a novel. Preferably not too long as you're going to have to go through it a few times.

*How many pages does it have?*

*How many chapters does it have?*

*How many words? (Count the number in one average page and multiply by number of pages.)*

*How many major characters?*

*How many secondary?*

*How many minor?*  
*How many settings are there?*  
*How many interiors and how many exteriors?*  
*Are the descriptions of settings adequate for setting the scene?*  
*How much internal dialogue do the characters have (assuming the novel is in the third person)?*  
*Write down the first sentence of each chapter.*  
*Do they differ or are they similar?*  
*At what point in the narrative could you see the denouement coming? (Be honest!)*  
*At what point in the narrative do you think the writer is 'locked in' to where he has to go?*  
*Quarter of the way through? Half way?*  
*From that point could you change the plot to make a better story?*

## **NOW**

Do the same thing again for a different novel by another author.

Now, these are not set Tasks for this Module, but the analysis above is merely to give you an example of the lengths and techniques you must go to to learn your art. Becoming a good writer is not just a process of sitting at a keyboard and tapping out your story. You must know the whys and wherefores of what you are doing, just as any tradesman must be comfortable with his tools.

I don't expect you to go through the above process on an ongoing basis. Once is probably enough if you have an open and enquiring mind. What I'm trying to impress on you is the need to know your work. Why does a character exist within the story? Is his existence totally necessary? Why does he hate/love this other character? Why does he say this or that? Each element must justify its existence. For now you must justify all this in your own mind at every turn, but later it will come naturally and you will be on the road to becoming a confident and fulfilled writer.

These, I know, are the dull days of this Training Course, but I believe them to be absolutely necessary. You're not a writer, and you never will be, unless you learn what good writing is, and what makes it so. It's not enough to say, 'I know nothing about art, but I know what I like'.

Let us digress for a moment and consider art and music. Could Salvador Dali draw a good likeness of your mother? You wouldn't think so to look at his abstract work, but Dali knew his craft before he started experimenting with form.

Similarly, when I first heard the guitarist Jimi Hendrix I was not impressed by his reliance on feedback which sounded like no more than screeching. It was not till I saw a TV documentary on this genius, after his death, sitting on a stool with only an acoustic guitar and making it sing that I came to appreciate that this man too knew his craft before he created his art.

This is what you must learn, the craft of writing, the nuts and bolts that hold a story together. Later, if you have that muse, you can apply your art to your craft and create what you like, but at this point I would suggest that you begin every piece you write with the words 'Once upon a time ...'. No builder starts without a plan and you cannot write without a sound grasp of the storyteller's craft. Admittedly, later in the Course, as we discuss building characters, writing dialogue, or setting a tone, I will be leading you by the hand through the actual process of writing. But you can pre-empt me by doing a lot of homework before we get there.

Try this -

Find a page in one of the novels you analysed above, and read it. Now pick a line of dialogue in the middle of the page and re-write it in your own words.

Without referring to the book, write the next paragraph.

Is it the same as the book? I doubt it, unless you have a photographic memory.

Does what you have written take you in a radically different direction from the original author?

I don't think one paragraph is enough to take you too far away from the original author's intent, but if you'd continued to the end of the chapter, you'd probably find it very hard to get back onto the author's plotline.

Why does this happen?

Because no story is set in stone.

Did you manage to capture the author's style? We'll be going into this in much greater depth in the Style Module, but it's always an interesting game to try and match another writer's prose style.

You'll have to rely on a third party to differentiate between the original writer's work and your own, but if you can find a piece of work that the third party is familiar with and insert your own work without them noticing it will be a major feather in your cap. The ability to mimic or ape another's work is another brick in the wall you're building.

The greatest analytical tool is also the most unquantifiable, because it requires you to exhibit a modicum of ESP. What I'm asking you to is read another writer's mind. Read his work (you're allowed to use your eyes for this) and try to work out how his mind was working as he wrote the words. Try to imagine his motivation for characters, dialogue, setting and plot.

Another interesting game to test your ESP is to read the first chapter of a novel, or long enough for the main character and situation to be established. Now, put the book aside and, on one page, plot the rest. Now, return to the book and read to the end. How close did you get in predicting where the writer would go? This is really easy with John Grisham novels, but look at the money he's made.

Is Grisham a good writer. In my opinion, no. He's a trained lawyer and he writes about what he knows, therefore he displays a lack of imagination. His characters struggle to reach two dimensions. He has no style and his dialogue is, at best, adequate. Yet he is wildly successful.

Why?

Because his writing does not make any demands of the reader. It is aeroplane fodder, designed to be served on a plastic tray, an easy read.

I'm not blowing the trumpet for high literature here, but Grisham's books rarely stay in the memory. 'I don't care', you may say, 'I want to be a successful writer like Grisham.'

Okay, but we'll learn to be writers first, shall we, and then decide in which style you want to write and if that leads to popularity and success, good for you.

Remember the way this works -

You have the ability to write

This Course gives you the techniques and the confidence to progress

You write till you drop

God smiles on you

That's all we can hope for.

## EXERCISES

Your Exercises for this Module are -

[1] RESEARCH. Go to an internet search engine and look up the Declaration of Arbroath and the American Declaration of independence. Write a 500 word discussion document on the comparisons and differences between the two.

[2] ANALYSIS. James Bond is a well known fictional character. From what you know of him, write a 500 word piece, ostensibly autobiographical, where Bond explains the drives and motivations of his life.

### MODULE 3 [Finding Your Voice]

The writer's 'voice' is vital but is generally misunderstood. What it essentially means is the tone and style that the writer writes in. The novice writer struggles to find his voice because he lacks the confidence to nail his colours to the mast. To say, this is what I write, love it or loathe it. To find your voice you must experiment with many different voices till you find one that suits not only your style of writing, but one that you feel comfortable writing in. Once you find it, you will slip into it as easily as your shoes and have no fears of facing the keyboard.

Look at the style in which I write this. My aim is to be informal, chatty and perhaps light-hearted because I believe that is what the teaching/learning process requires. For other projects I would adopt a voice that best suited the material and the potential audience. The good writer must therefore have a selection of voices from which to choose, but always one that is his own true voice.

How then does voice differ from style?

It's a question of semantics. Your voice, in truth, is your internal thinking put on paper, whereas style can vary pace, tone and other attributes. For instance, I could describe a leafy garden in a slow, highly graphic manner, picturing every blade of grass. With this I would be lulling the reader into slowing their reading, whether to attack them with some shock revelation or to set the tone for a relaxed, perhaps romantic, read. But with the same voice I could hit the reader between the eyes with high colour writing that would have him on his toes. Possible? Let's try it.

There's a small lawn area, where she used to lie during warm summers, and by the hedge the flowerbeds lent their hues to honour her. Colour would be too simple a description for there was a give and take, she gifting the flowers beauty, while they reflected on her creamy skin and added their perfume to her scent.

OR

See the green, it's grass, it's wet. And that's all it could be. Earth's verdant carpet? No, it's food, we eat the grasses like the cows. And her, as if she cared, sucking the sun in her tiny bikini that brings whistles from the builders..

With a seasoned eye you'd see the differences there. In the second version, shorter words and sentences, a staccato style. Neither of these is my voice, they are adopted for effect. The first version is too lazy for my liking, whereas the second is more likely to alienate an audience unless it was a style they were looking for.

Your written voice is therefore like your spoken one, variable.

So, how do you go about finding your voice?

Well, first of all you should do a lot of reading and find authors who write with a voice that you enjoy. Copying them may be your route to finding your voice. Discovering authors you positively hate should also tell you in which direction you shouldn't head. Once you find something you're comfortable with you have to try and copy the style. This can be a lengthy process, but the only

way you're going to find your voice is by writing. Page after page, chapter after chapter. It may become tedious, but in the end you will find a tone, a pace and a style - your voice

## EXERCISES

The only way to find your voice is to write and experiment. Your exercise for this Module is to write a 1,000 word short story in 3 separate style or voices.

You might find it easier to have a different character tell each version of the tale, or see it from a different viewpoint, to achieve this.

## MODULE 4 [Plot & Narrative]

So what is a plot?

In its simplest terms it is a plan of action, and where the writer is concerned it is the sequence of events which make up his story.

Here is a sequence of events :-

George woke up that morning.

He showered, shaved and brushed his teeth.

He ate the breakfast his wife had prepared.

He dressed and drove to work.

At his desk he checked his emails.

He processed some orders his company had received.

He ate lunch in the local pub with his friend Bob.

In the afternoon he presented his monthly report to his boss.

He visited the factory and checked output with the foreman.

He drove home and played with his two kids.

He ate dinner with the family.

He watched TV.

He went to bed.

Fascinating? A day in the life of? No, I'd expect you'd say it was boring. Why? Because nothing out of the ordinary happens. There is no plot, or at least none that would interest a reader. So rule number one of creating a plot must be that something happens. Let's look at that again.

George woke up that morning.

He showered, shaved and brushed his teeth.

He ate the breakfast his wife had prepared.

He dressed and drove to work.

At his desk he checked his emails.

He processed some orders his company had received.

He ate lunch in the local pub with his friend Bob.

**Bob told him he loved him.**

In the afternoon he presented his monthly report to his boss.

He visited the factory and checked output with the foreman.

He drove home and played with his two kids.

He ate dinner with the family.

He watched TV.

He went to bed.



Well, something certainly happened there. George discovers that his friend Bob is gay and is in love with him.

Does that make this a story?

Not to my mind. What we have is an incident, with no consequent resolution. What are the options?

George is disgusted and breaks off his friendship with Bob.

George admits his own homosexuality and returns Bob's love.

George tells Bob he knew he was gay but, as a heterosexual, cannot return his love.

This addition of complication starts the process of creating a plot. How much further complication we add is down to the writer. The reader expects a certain level of complexity, but not so much that he loses track of events.

At this point I'd just like to emphasise that physical action is not necessary to create a story. The entire sequence of events could take place inside George's head. His motivations, desires, fears and thoughts, if portrayed in a logical sequence, would make for a perfectly acceptable tale.

Classical storytelling techniques require a protagonist (the hero) and an antagonist (the villain).

With a three act set-up we create a conflict in the first act. In the second we resolve it, In the third we find that the resolution is not adequate and further efforts on the part of the hero are required to reach the denouement.

Can good storytelling be reduced to such a simple formula? The answer is yes and no, but in essence it always boils down to these elements.

If you think this is very restrictive look at the variations that can be injected into the above. There can be more than one protagonist (the hero often has a sidekick). The antagonist can also have one or more henchmen. The problem posed which leads to the conflict can be anything from a missing baby's rattle to the theft of a nuclear weapon. And, within the confines of a story arc that means conflict-effort-resolution we can add as much complication as we can imagine.

Why doesn't the Bond villain just shoot Bond when he has him prisoner? Because it would make a lousy story. How believable the villain's motivation is for keeping Bond alive (and thus allowing him to escape) is entirely up to the creative skill of the writer.

There are rules, but they are not hard and fast. They can be played with and modified, but it is essential that you know they exist. Let's get creative again.

George's wife, Sally, is driving home from her evening class.

On a lonely country road she is stopped by a terrifying sight, a UFO.

The aliens from the UFO kidnap Sally.

The aliens are a species called the Darg, who are collecting specimens of life from across the galaxy.

So far, so X Files. Where would you go next? Because there still isn't a story, all we have is a situation. Is this Sally's story, telling of how she attempts to escape from her abductors? Or is it George's, as he tries to rescue his wife? Perhaps it is the chief Darg's story, as he learns to appreciate humanity. The variety is almost endless. Maybe George doesn't want Sally back, because he's run off with Bob. Hey, that's two stories, Bob's and Sally's. Wouldn't that be interesting? It's called running dual plots and is a common way of fleshing out a story. The denouement of both tales here would probably require Sally's escape and Bob's realisation that she is his true love to coincide at the conclusion.

I'm only trying to poke your creativity here, to let you see what possibilities lie in creating

characters and running with them. You don't know where you're going to end up, or do you? Here sits a basic problem for new writers, whether to plot in advance or simply to start writing and see where it leads. There are some who will laboriously detail each character and each event before they begin writing. If it works for them, fine, but I find the process boring. The alternative is to have the kernel of an idea and to start writing immediately while full of fire. The flaw with this system is that you can often end up in blind alleys in your plot and can't find a way out. Every decision you make as to how your plot develops will have consequences. You can't have Bob being gay and then running off with Sally without some very sharp explaining that your readers will accept. That's when unfinished novels get thrown into a drawer.

So, what's the answer?

For me, it's this.

I have an idea.

I might take a few swift notes, a rough guide to plot and the main characters.

No more than a page in all.

I begin writing the piece, enjoying the freedom to create.

But I know that danger lies ahead. With every word I write I am locking myself down as to the directions I can take. I also know that the original enthusiasm and inspiration can disappear quite quickly.

So at some point (perhaps 5,000 words) I stop.

Now I do the drudge work. The character sketches, the plot development, the relationship arcs.

How does that work?

If you recall the Non-Fiction Module you'll know what's required. A dissection of what you've got so far.

Write a synopsis of your idea. It should be no more than 200 words at this stage.

List each character. Give them a brief physical description together with what type of person they are. Cross-reference them, noting their relationship with each other, even if it means saying something like 'Sally doesn't know Bob.'

Note the situation your characters are in. Where they live, what they do, how they think.

Return to your synopsis. Is there enough story there to fill your story length (short story/novel). If not, what believable complications can you add to flesh it out? Add this to your synopsis. Does your denouement make sense? All your story and characters arcs must conclude here, so don't leave any loose ends. Under no circumstances can you write, 'George awoke and realised it had all been a dream', unless you have a very valid reason for doing so. That does not include being unable to find your conclusion. Your options are to continue writing till the conclusion presents itself, or to go back in your narrative to the point where you got locked in to the story you eventually wrote, and change it. Characters have a habit of taking on their own life and often the most densely plotted narrative can be thrown off course by a line a character utters or an action he takes. You, as the writer may feel that you are in control, but I have my doubts. When this happens, just keep writing, let the buggers sort it out for themselves.

You'll find this at times, that it's not actually you doing the writing, that the characters take over. You don't need to fight this, it's a good thing and will lead to some of your best writing. I've seen me return to stuff I've written years ago and recognise it, but not the fact that I wrote it. This is the subconscious taking over and allowing you to write on autopilot.

Some people call this being taken over by the muse.

## EXERCISES

Okay, here are a bunch of characters :-

Joe (42) A joiner

Louise (38) Joe's wife. A hairdresser

Tom (14) Joe and Louise's son

Martin (24) A professional wrestler

Sandy (19) A female student

Jack (60) A retired dentist

Des (30) A soldier

Mandy (25) A barmaid

Write the synopsis for a plot (500 words) that brings these characters together in one place.

## **MODULE 5 [Characters]**

For me, this is one of the most enjoyable parts of writing, because the creation of characters to populate your tale is when you can be at your most creative.

To make your characters interesting, avoid the obvious. All heroes need not be square-jawed and not all heroines beautiful. Look for the flaws in people, that is what makes them interesting.

You have plenty of raw material, unless you're a hermit, you're surrounded by people. Use them, but with caution. Basing a fictional character on someone who actually exists is fraught with danger. Not only is there the chance of being sued, but as a writer you're locking yourself into a reality which may not serve your purpose.

By all means take elements from people, a way of looking, a mode of speech, but play mix and match to create something new. As I stated in the previous Module if they have an internal life they will take over your plot anyway. If they don't, if they're flat and two dimensional you've got a huge boulder to shove up a mountain.

There are two elements to your character, their physical appearance, and the workings of their minds. Let us deal firstly with physical appearance. This can be done with broad brush strokes. A few short descriptive sentences will set up your reader with all the information they need to picture the character. They already have a library of types in their mind and will merely recall that this character sounds like Uncle Harry, though he may dress like Elton John. If you wish to use some specific physical characteristic (a scar, perhaps, or a limp) to delineate your character, try to ensure that it has some relevance to the character or plot. Don't just put it in because every villain has a scar down his cheek. How did he get it? In a duel? A car accident?

Is this what made him become an evil criminal? Does it flare crimson when your character is angry? Does this warn the hero that there is trouble ahead?

The same goes for dress. Telling your reader that a character is a bank clerk has already set him up as a staid dresser, so there's no sense in describing his dark gray suit, navy blue tie and black, polished shoes, unless his dress plays a part in the plot. However, if our bank clerk is an outlandish dresser we would have to mention the fact, even if it played no part in the plot, because it tells us something about our chap's mind.

Modern writing tends to pare description to the bone, so we don't have the leeway of a Sir Walter Scott. It is essential, therefore, that with your limited number of words you achieve the maximum impact.

A method I've previously used is to cut out photographs of people from newspapers and magazines. Not well known people, but just the ordinary man or woman in the street. I then base my character descriptions on these photographs. The trick is to begin with quite a full description

of several paragraphs and then whittle it down to a couple of sentences. But ones which capture the essence of my character.

Dealing with personality is a much more difficult proposition.

We must accept, firstly, that no character can be defined as totally good or totally bad. This would make for bland personalities and these do not appeal. The hero cannot therefore simply represent good and the villain bad. They will have opposing points of view and it is down to the reader to decide which character they identify with. If you have written them well the hero will appear more sympathetic and only the sociopath will plump for the villain.

You must understand that your baddie does not believe himself to be an evil person. He has his own internal logic which justifies his deeds. Perhaps he blames his behaviour on an unhappy childhood or his financial circumstances, but he must be able to justify what he does. Let me give you an example of what I mean. I knew a shoplifter once, a perfectly reasonable chap who regarded theft from major stores as a profession and not a crime. He justified himself by claiming that he did not steal from other working class people but from faceless monolithic businesses, who would be reimbursed by the insurance companies anyway. The fact that the insurance companies would then charge the stores increased premiums which would reflect in the prices the stores charged was too far removed to affect him. He dutifully got up every morning, dressed and went to work, which meant stealing women's clothes from department stores. He would complain about the hours he had to put in and his working conditions, just like any other working man and couldn't accept the fact that if he turned his talents to legitimate work the police would stop throwing him into jail. That was just another perk of the job.

Was this a bad man? He was married with kids, but he was a career criminal, even if the career wasn't as high flying as he might have liked. But he wasn't evil, not Hitler evil. But Hitler can't be written as a fictional character because nobody would believe in him.

Oh, and the reason he stole women's clothes is that they were easy to sell to drunk men in pubs who were trying to placate their wives when they got home (even if they did get the wrong size of garment).

Pathetic? A loser? Maybe, but a character worth writing.

And the good guy? Well, we're all good guys, so we just write about ourselves surely? Uuh, you really that good? A few flaws maybe? Okay okay, you're human with all the consequent failings and that's perfectly acceptable because it's the flaws that make you interesting. The hero's function, you see, is not to utter heroic statements and perform heroic deeds, though he can certainly do this. What makes him the hero is the requirement the plot makes of him to face up to its conflict, whatever that may be.

And remember as well that the protagonist and antagonist (hero and villain) need not even be human. They can be organisations, countries, animals or even machines. Readers will relate to the human elements of these, but there's no reason why your hero can't be the US Marines and your villain Bambi.

Writing characters isn't a precise science, some work and some don't. As with everything else in the writing world the only way to discover the truth is to write it.

## EXERCISES

Write 200 word character sketches of the people below. Description of both appearance and personality.



## MODULE 6 [Dialogue]

The ability to write good dialogue can make or break a writer, yet there is only one requirement, that it be believable to the reader or listener.

For the dramatist who writes to be heard rather than read, dialogue is of course vitally important. But it is amazing the number of writers who imagine that because they can converse, they can write convincing dialogue.

Dramatic dialogue is not written conversation, as any reality tape recording will prove.

Conversation relies on gestures and visual hints, together with pauses for reflection and long periods of silence. Though the dramatist can include such reinforcement to increase the reality of his work, prolonged usage will prove excruciating to the audience. The art of successful dramatic dialogue is in the balance between the transmission of information and the dramatic effect it has.

Every piece of dialogue must have a purpose. Does it move the plot forward? Does it explain a character's motivation? Or the relationship between two characters? Characters in a drama cannot just chat, they must drive the drama forward in some fashion.

It is important too, that each character has a distinctive voice which differentiates him from the rest of the cast. These differences can come in many forms, accents, vocabulary range, pitch of voice, all valuable markers for the audience. Vital in radio writing, they are also useful in visual media because the audience can 'log on' to a character if he adequately delivers a well-written line. "The name's Bond, James Bond," carries authority and self-assurance even when delivered with Sean Connery's Scottish slur. Or perhaps because of it.

So how does the writer learn to write good dialogue? Of course he must listen, but with a writer's ear, and reading his written work is never going to be an adequate trial to assess the worth of his dialogue. It must be read aloud, preferably into a tape recorder and listened to with an objective ear. Get your partner to join in the fun and enjoy the experience. You might not be actors but you'll get a better sense of how it's going to sound to an audience. Eventually your ear will adjust

and you can forego the pleasure of casting your beloved as a mass murderer, but until such time listening to your own work is a useful tool.

Try not to trip up actors with over-complex dialogue, they are simple folk and should be helped at all costs. Most importantly know the style of the people you are writing, the cockney barrow boy speaks much differently from the Montana cowboy but you must avoid clichés. Try having the cockney say ‘Howdy’. Accents and dialects are useful but you can test the value of the dialogue by trying it in different styles. I was once paid to translate an English play into Scots dialect. This mainly consisted of turning ‘your’ into ‘yer’ but the Scots actors insisted on it as it made their job easier.

In listening to other people’s speech patterns try to make a judgment call on the situation you are eavesdropping. Are these two lovers, Or two drunks about to come to blows?

Mastering dialogue puts you in the driving seat with opportunities in stage work, radio, TV and cinema. Remember the great lines, the great bits of dialogue you have heard. What made them work? Who said them? Where? Why?

Okay, time for me to bore you with some of my material. The following is the opening scene from a radio sit-com pilot called DOC. Note that in this, I have to pass on a lot of information about the characters and situation to a cold audience, but in an entertaining way.

#### SCENE 1.

THE WEST-END BAR, EARLY EVENING. IT IS QUIET AND A JUKEBOX PLAYS WEARY TUNES. DOC AND BILLY ENTER AND COME TO THE BAR.

DOC: (SINGING) Happy days are here again! Yo there, Flora. Lagers for me and the boy.

BILLY: I don’t want a pint, Doc.

DOC: Listen, young Bill, when I’m paying, I decide what you’re drinking, and this is National Lager Day.

FLORA: Every day’s National Lager Day for you.

DOC: That’s just a rumour, I’m partial to alcohol in any shape or form.

FLORA: Aye, you’re nothing but a sad old bugger.

DOC: I love it when you talk dirty, Flora. (HE DRINKS NOISILY) Nectar! First today!

FLORA: You’re a liar, Ken told me you were in at lunchtime.

DOC: Half-pints, they don’t count.

FLORA: You had fifteen of them, Doc.

DOC: Well, it’s warm up in the work, you develop a thirst.

FLORA: Billy, have you discovered what he does up in that hospital, because he’s certainly not any kind of doctor I can think of, despite his nickname.

BILLY: He sort of wanders about in a white coat, trying tae look important.

FLORA: Just as I thought, a waster.

DOC: Hey, I went to college for five years to learn that.

FLORA: Aye, but what is it precisely you do?

DOC: It’s like this, my lovely. When you start up in the hospital, they hand you a chemistry set. If you drop it, they make you a porter like Billy here; if you pass the responsibility onto somebody else, they make you a doctor .....

BILLY: ..... and if ye chase nurses all the time, they make ye a senior lab technician like you.

DOC: Heyy, that’s my line!

BILLY: Well, you keep tellin’ me you’re teachin’ me the ways of the world.

DOC: Fair enough. More drink, Flora!



FLORA: Do you not think you should have something to eat before you get into a heavy drinking session?

DOC: If you're going to treat me like a husband, I'm going to demand my conjugal rights.

FLORA: Money!

DOC: What, are you charging for it now?

FLORA: (REALISING) For the drinks !

DOC: You had me worried there, there's still room in this capitalist world for the enthusiastic amateur, y'know.

FLORA: You have a one-track mind.

DOC: I'm a romantic, Flora, as you well know. Listen, Billy, she's got 'Property of Doc' tattooed on her left buttock.

FLORA: I have not !

DOC: Sorry sorry, right buttock. The left one's got the list of previous owners.

FLORA: Don't you listen to him, Billy, he's sick.

DOC: Not at all, I'm the young fella's guru, teaching him the ways of the world. Who introduced you to the mysteries of the nurses' quarters, Billy ? Who's going to get you educational DVDs?

BILLY: You're taking yer own sweet time about them.

DOC: I'm trying to get the latest releases for you, with all the new moves and grips.

FLORA: I can understand a young fella like Billy being obsessed, Doc, but a man your age.

DOC: I can't help it, Flora, it's that bum of yours, it drives me wild. In fact, I don't even think of it as a bum, more of a leisure centre.

FLORA: Is that all you pathetic buggers think about, bottoms?

DOC: Not at all. There's bosoms. We often think of bosoms.

FLORA: See, I told you, the drink has gone straight to your head.

DOC: (WEARILY) We should never have given them the vote, Billy. But she's right, there's a long night ahead of us, we should eat, put a lining on our stomachs. What flavour of crisps do you want ?

## FADE DOWN

Notice that here I'm just setting the scene with no reference to any plot that is to follow. An audience will allow you a little time to do this, but I would have to set up some conflict fairly quickly after this to maintain the listener's interest. The alternative is to start off by asking the big question the plot poses, and then returning to paint the characters. Both methods are valid.

The extract from DOC is there to prove that you can paint characters with dialogue, you don't need description. The joy of dialogue is that one character can pass comment on another, which reveals elements of the personalities of both.

## EXERCISES

Your Exercises for this Module are as follows :-

Write a 3 minute radio dialogue (approx. 3 pages) between 2 characters on the the phone to each other. They are army buddies who haven't seen each other for 10 years. Use the dialogue to paint a picture of each character and what has happened to them during that decade.

The two above characters now meet up in a pub with their respective spouses. Write a scene for a stage play of this meeting, relying mostly on dialogue rather than action, though action (eg one character going to the bar for a drink can allow you to focus the dialogue of the remaining characters). The relationship between the characters is entirely up to you.

## MODULE 7 [Structure]



The reason structure is so important to the writer is that try as he may he is locked into it, because readers, listeners and viewers have an expectation of how a narrative is going to play out.

Yes, you can try to be clever and break the rules of structure, many have done it before you, but in the end run what proves popular is a three act structure with a protagonist in conflict with an antagonist. Learn how to do this well and you can experiment as you please, but learn to master the creation of structure before you proceed.

It is a common flaw with novice writers that they claim structure stifles creativity. This is nonsense and immature. Structure enhances creativity. How hard do you have to engage the creative process if you have unlimited scope for a screenplay? And how much harder do you have to work if I tell you we only have the budget for a cast of four and six locations?

Yes, structure imposes discipline, but the experienced writer does not regard it as his enemy, but his friend. Once you gain experience you won't even think about structure, it will come as naturally to you as breathing. Only now, as you learn your trade, will you have to concentrate on moulding your work into a recognisable form.

Structure can be imposed before the writing process begins or in the sub-editing. Only you will discover which method suits you.

So, what is structure? Simple, a beginning, a middle and an end. So, what's all the fuss about? Because, funnily enough, a lot of people don't understand what these things mean. That's it, nothing complicated about it. You can have three protagonists and a veritable host of problems but that is the essence of structure and it's that way for a reason. The reader wants and expects the hero to solve the problem but he does not want it done easily. There must be a logical progression, and mistakes made, before he arrives at the correct solution. And sometimes he doesn't, sometimes he fails. This is perfectly allowable, but leaves the reader dissatisfied.

And the beauty of structure is that it is flexible. You could open your piece with the escalation of the problem, another murder perhaps, because this has dramatic impact to hook the reader, and then return in flashback to what has happened previously. Again, this is allowable, but the structure remains.

Let's apply this to a love story.

If boy loves girl and girl loves boy and they both live happily ever after, there's hardly a story worth telling.

**BUT**

If we throw in a problem or conflict we have the makings of drama.

So, the boy has a rival, an utter rotter, but much better looking than our hero and favoured by our maiden. How does he win her hand?

Well, obviously, he goes and tells her that the other guy is no good and that's the end of that. I think not. She can't believe him, it's too easy. So, how does he convince her about his own merits, and the black heart of his rival?

A classic twist is for the rival to try and destroy the hero's chances and by his actions reveal his own worth. This is good, but our man must take positive action to solve the problem too or he will seem weak.

And, if we stick to classic structure, at some point in the middle of our tale our hero must be close to success, before another problem throws his plans awry.

If you can impose structure on your work it makes no difference if it is well written or achieves success, it is a professionally written piece of work and will be appreciated for that alone. The only thing I would advise is not to make your structure too visible. The skeleton is meant to be under the skin.

To top the ante you should also aim to have a beginning, middle and end within each act, so that they could almost stand alone as stories. This is difficult to achieve, but will leave readers marvelling at the richness of your imagination and writing skills.

As with every other element of these Modules, the only way you're going to achieve any level of competence is by writing and experimenting. Don't think of structure and write a short story. Now, if you go back and analyse it you may well find that you have adhered to the rules of structure anyway. Just as readers are programmed to expect a classic structure, so you too as a reader and a writer are subconsciously wired to expect certain things from a drama.

There is a place for stories with different or even no structures and this type of experimental writing appeals to many, but I would implore anyone to learn their craft before embarking on any experimental voyages. Often the writer will find that what he started off with great idealistic hopes as a stream-of-consciousness novel ends up with a three act structure despite his best efforts.

There really is nothing new under the sun, everything's been tried before.

The whole function of the writer is to be read and if he creates something which he alone regards as a masterpiece while being shunned by the rest of the world, he has failed, and miserably at that.

## EXERCISES

Take one of the Sherlock Holmes short stories. Extract the structure from it. That is, identify where the beginning ends and the middle begins and so on. Identify too where Conan Doyle throws in his problem escalation in the second act.

## MODULE 8 [Tempo]

Tempo and pace will define one of the ways your reader absorbs your material. As the writer you are in charge of putting thoughts into your reader's mind, to play with his emotions. It is a great responsibility and must be dealt with as such.

Whatever tempo you wish to achieve within the reader, you as the writer must remain static, if only to stay unmoved by the drama that is unfolding. There is no fault in becoming excited by your work, just don't become overexcited and lose track of what you're actually trying to achieve.

So, how do you vary the tempo of what you write?

The answer is in length. The length of words and the length of sentences. Short words and short sentences increase speed, whereas long words and sentences slow it down. Sentences can be elongated by the judicious use of adjectives and adverbs, and the addition of description. This is true of both dialogue and action. Note the following :-

She got up.

She rose from her seat.

She shifted her weight and casually climbed from the chair.

Tempo can play an important part in setting a mood. The modern reader tends to speed-read, skipping over passages they regard as too wordy or descriptive. They are quite prepared to let their own mind fill in the gaps, so the opportunities to vary pace are limited, but there is still a place for deliberately slowing down action for dramatic purposes. This could be the prelude to a romantic scene or to lull the reader into a false sense of tranquility before some violent episode.

Varying tempo in dialogue is a more difficult procedure because it depends so much on the character that is speaking the lines. For instance an old lady is unlikely to speak in short, clipped and staccato sentences whereas a gang boss might. At the same time, a middle class, middle aged housewife might change her speech patterns during a period of stress. All these elements must be borne in mind, because your characters make their own demands and may not wish to accommodate your need to speed up your prose.

Time and place will also be factors here. Speech patterns vary through time and the historical novel may set its tone with lengthy and elaborate dialogue whereas the cyber punk novel demands punchy and perhaps earthy speech. In fact, within the realms of science fiction the writer may even invent new languages or modes of speech, and some writers find this level of control very attractive. The chance to create a whole new world, inhabited by people with alien cultures, languages, tastes, economics, education, entertainment, and perhaps even means of reproduction is a challenge every writer should face up to at some point because it will teach you how each element you invent is reliant on other factors, and that is just as true in writing.

The two elements which will impact on the tempo of your writing are your own writing style and the type of material you are writing. While never encouraging you to be untrue to yourself I would suggest that you stick with the demands of the piece if you can. After all, there is no real reason to attempt a historical romance if you feel most comfortable with a fast paced western. Though, of course, the old west is now strictly speaking historical and they must have had romance then, so a fast paced romantic western is quite viable. I might attempt a page or two, just for the fun of it, but good luck if you want to give it a crack.

The reader's needs must be considered and demands that you begin your piece with a middling pace and only vary the tempo for effect. To begin with a slow pace may bore the reader and to attack the reader with pace may frighten them off as they struggle to catch up with you.

I am not for a minute suggesting that this should tie you down. As the writer you are the boss and how you write is entirely up to yourself. I am only suggesting a sensible way to proceed. But do remember to consider the reader and how he will perceive your work. If you write only for yourself that is a different matter, but if like most you'd like to be read, remember that readers need to be seduced by your words.

## EXERCISES

Write an account of your day's events (500 words). This should include at least one conversation you had. Write this in your normal voice at your natural tempo.

Now, rewrite this twice, firstly at a fast tempo (300 words) and secondly at a slow tempo (700 words).

Take a short story you know well and analyse it to see what tempo it is written in. Try to rewrite passages in a different tempo while retaining the flavour.

Don't panic, this is a very short Module with a very simple Exercise to follow.

All that a synopsis is is a short sketch of your work. Publishers and such like it because it saves them having to read novels in full. It must, therefore, include all the elements of your story. That is characters, setting and events.

I don't believe a synopsis should be much longer than 500 words but it is essential that it includes all that's best in your work. Think of it as an advertisement for your piece. If they're going to buy your book, they have to be convinced by your ad.

Sometimes the writer finds himself too close to his work to synopsis it. He has a few alternatives to consider. Firstly, he can put the work aside for a period and return to it with a fresh mind.

Secondly, he can ask a friend to read it and write the synopsis.

Thirdly, he can go back to the original plot he wrote and with a few additions, and providing he has not strayed too far, submit that as the synopsis.

Don't try and tell the publisher his job in your synopsis. Don't suggest your work's potential market, or claim that it is a blockbuster just waiting to hit the bookshelves. On the other side of the coin, don't use your synopsis to beg. Have some pride in your work and let it stand up for itself.

## EXERCISES

Pick one of your favourite novels. Reread it. Now write a 500 word synopsis.

## MODULE 10 [Style]

Every part of the writing process interacts and crosses over with others. So narrative and plot have links with structure and dialogue depends on character. In the same way Style and your Voice are similar but not interchangeable. To put it in a human context, the way you speak need not reflect the way you dress.

Your writing style is where you bring together all your skills in creating characters, situations and dialogue and combine them with your own personal flair to entertain your audience. Try not to be too precious about this, even if you are writing high literature, in the end run we are no more than song and dance men who are given a chance to appear on a stage and perform for a time.

My own take on it is that even if I am but a song and dance man, the skill to perform has been given to me by God and I will be the best hoofer I can be.

You may think I'm stalling here, and you'd be right, because style, like your voice, is something you must develop yourself. I can't teach you style any more than I can teach you how to have one leg shorter than the other, though I might be able to teach you how to limp. All I can do is point you in the direction of styles you might wish to emulate. Again, your own personal preferences, your favourite authors, will play a part, but even if you begin with basic mimicry, work it till you find your own style.

Okay, I'm going to start with some best-seller thriller style. Try to see what and why I'm writing here.

Charlie sat down opposite Len.

"Why did you come?"

"You know I had to."

“No I don’t. You had the chance to escape, why didn’t you take it?”  
“Jeeze, Charlie, don’t make me say it.”  
“Say what? That you felt guilty? Cause I don’t buy it, not after what you did.”  
“You’re a shit.”  
“I try my best.”

Notice that after the briefest of set ups the rest of the piece consists solely of dialogue. This is a novel written by a guy looking to sell a screenplay. It’s sharp and quick and that’s what the modern reader is looking for. But there are other styles this could be written in.

Charlie sat down opposite Len.

“Why did you come?” he asked, and his voice was cold and brittle.

“You know I had to.”

“No I don’t. You had the chance to escape, why didn’t you take it?”

Len shifted uneasily in his seat. “Jeeze, Charlie, don’t make me say it.”

“Say what? That you felt guilty? Cause I don’t buy it, not after what you did.”

“You’re a shit.” Len felt the venom welling up within him, the anger returning. He’d had enough of this charade and was determined to wipe the smug smile from the bigger man’s face.

“I try my best,” Charlie smirked.

Better or worse? Is there really that much in it? Adding a little description slows it down a tad but allows me to fill in a little more detail of the relationship between the two men. This is a style that comes from a slightly earlier age and might appeal to a slightly older reader, but it’s hardly prehistoric. For my taste I’d use both of the above styles in one piece to vary the tempo. Others might wish to add further levels of description and more dialogue which would slow things down further but would impart more information to the reader. Note for instance that I have given no description of the surroundings this conversation takes place in. Neither have I given any character descriptions. As the writer you have to make decisions constantly about how relevant each ‘scene’ is. Is the above conversation worthy of half a page? Or would that throw other elements of my piece out of kilter?

To the casual reader these things are unimportant but to the writer these are the nuts and bolts he must master if he wants to succeed. You must get into the habit of constantly analysing what you write and ultimately edit it, which is where you may be required to murder your babies.

Okay, Charlie and Len are boring me, so we’ll leave them sitting there having their tiff and move on.

The starship was immense, a huge silver disc which filled the sky. So large in fact that the mind couldn’t give it exact dimension. John had never seen anything so big, no natural formation like a mountain and certainly nothing man-made. Even with all his time in the cities, with their megabuildings

there was nothing to match this and he felt himself tremble at the powers that must have been required in its construction. A warm breeze brushed his face, was this coming from the ship? He couldn’t tell. But the noise, the deep rumbling roar, that definitely came from the belly of

that great beast. He wanted to run, but it was as if the entire weight of the great flying machine was resting atop him and transfixing him to the spot.

Acceptable? Okay, let’s try again.

It was big. Bigger than he could imagine, this sky machine. John shook. He had seen many

things during his time in the cities but this was different. Nothing like this could exist in his world.

It was unnatural. To go with its sky swamping size there came a dull rumble that shook the very earth. Fear gripped him, but he couldn't move. And the hot brush of air could only carry the scent of his fear.

Same subject, same events, described differently. No dialogue, but that was deliberate, because you get a better chance to exhibit style with pure prose.

My purpose in writing these pieces for you is to show how content and style are interlinked. You must consider your content when deciding your style. Define your style and then develop it. But remember that your prime task is in transmitting information, your story. Style must never overwhelm content. Where elaborate style enhances, use it, but where it merely fulfills your vanity, forget it.

## EXERCISES

Yeah, you know what I'm going to ask you to do. Take the Charlie and Len incident and rewrite it in a very archaic style. It might help to think of these two as medieval knights

In the second piece, rewrite with the John character becoming Jean. It could be rewritten in exactly the same way, but I want you to try and impose a specifically female style to differentiate from my versions.

## MODULE 11 [Drama]

It's amazing the number of writers who become fixated on pure prose, believing that the only avenues open to them are the novel or the short story.

This is arrant nonsense. If you are a creative writer you must be able to write anything, and that includes comic books, stage plays, TV scripts, movie screenplays and even the text on the back of your breakfast cereal packet.

For this Module I want you to consider becoming a dramatist. The dramatist is one who writes for actors to perform his words. This puts a layer between the writer and his audience, but the intelligent actor will consult the writer before delivering his interpretation. The three main avenues for the dramatist are theatre, radio and TV/cinema, and each impose different disciplines and skills which you must learn if you wish to enter this field. This is not the place for an extended education in the arts of the dramatist, only a brief introduction to other roads the creative writer may walk.

Let us take writing for the theatre first. Stagecraft is fascinating and frightening. The writer, introvert by nature, is thrust into a world of dramaturges, actors, directors, stage managers and most scary, audiences. The writer finds his true worth as he awaits the response of a live audience. Give him applause and he walks on air, give him silence and he hangs his head, but boos would surely lead to an appointment with his maker. It takes a brave writer who is willing to take on that challenge, but the risk is worth the prize.

The first thing we must establish is that the dramatist is dialogue driven. Even in film, where the credo is 'show it, don't tell it' it is dialogue which drives the narrative. With theatre, there are limitations on what action can be performed on a live stage, and with radio there is little else available apart from dialogue.

Long descriptive passages describing scenery will get short shrift in the theatre where budgets might be limited; in radio they are irrelevant and in TV and cinema they are more than likely going to be decided by a set designer anyway who will want to bring his own art to the production.

So drama really is the place for the dialogue specialist. The most dialogue heavy medium is radio, where not much other than sound effects or incidental music is available to the listener.

The challenge for the writer is in dealing with such prosaic matters as a character entering a scene. Within a novel he could merely state that Jim came into the room at that point, and with theatre, TV and cinema it is perfectly obvious that Jim has arrived. It's only with the unnatural medium of radio that we have a problem. For another character to blandly announce, 'Oh, here's Jim' only works so often and we need to work out other strategies to signpost arrivals and departures. A slamming door sound effect may announce an arrival or departure but not which character it applies to.

For my first radio play I decided to cheat (mainly because I didn't know any better) and made most of the piece consist of an exchange of letters between two characters. There's a clue there, keep the number of characters in a radio play to a minimum and give them distinctive voices. This might mean male and female, old and young, different classes and the variety of regional accents available throughout the English speaking world. A dialogue between an old man, middle class from Birmingham, England, and a young, female, working class, Australian should leave the listener with few doubts.

But even though largely limited to dialogue, do try to break it up with intelligent use of sound effects and music. Sound effects do not necessarily mean explosions and squealing tyres, a quietly dripping tap can speak volumes.

In another radio play I had my lead character cook a curry for his niece. Let me tell you that the sound of Indian cooking differs not a jot from any other cuisine.

The primary market for radio writing is BBC Radio and their website has ample information on the craft of radio writing, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it. The positive side is that the range of plays the BBC produces means there are usually opportunities for writers willing to step outside the comfort zone.

Oops, I digressed again, I was meant to be talking about theatre.

The primary problem with writing for theatre is the sheer physical difficulties that performing on a stage impose. The novel and the screenplay may allow you to have your spaceship landing, but physics and finance make it difficult on stage unless you're working on a big west end show.

You're unlikely to start there as a playwright, you're more likely to find an opening with a small, local, community theatre. They're often looking for contemporary plays because they're fed up with doing Shakespeare or the other classics. But big name plays, by big name playwrights, cost big cheque royalties. So, a community group may be willing to pay you a small amount to write a play for them. They live in hope that they might unearth a gem, written by an unknown genius, and have their name permanently linked to it; and you have the opportunity of putting your work in front of an audience and also gaining publicity. Local newspapers love a story about the local boy making good.

I would advise getting to know your local drama group if possible. Their range of abilities are going to be presenting your work, so you really need to know what they're capable of. If you write to their strengths you may just be on to a winner. Try to make your subject locally relevant as well, as this will help in pulling an audience as well as sparking media interest. Check your



local newspaper and see what issues are irking the local yokels - a motorway bypass? Dogs fouling footpaths? Rowdy kids? They're all potential subjects for a play.

C'mon, you may say, a play about dogshit?

Yep, I could do it, I'd make it a comedy, and it would sell.

In the world of TV and cinema, because the rewards are so high, the competition is brutal, and I wouldn't advise even attempting these markets until you have a decent track record behind you.

In any case, most production companies won't look at unsolicited script unless it comes through an agent, and we're not at that stage yet.

If you really must tilt at windmills try writing a sitcom for television. A half hour programme only requires a 30 page script, so it's not going to kill you timewise and because there are so many TV production companies, you might manage to sneak something through. I'd try my hand at gag writing for a sketch show first though, just to ensure you have the comic muse.

Remember this - every line of dialogue in a sitcom script must either move the plot forward, be the set up line for a gag, or be the punchline to a gag. Nothing else.

The downside is that just about every possible subject matter has been mined for sitcom material so finding something new to cover is going to be difficult, but that doesn't mean you can't try.

For some reason comedy writing attracts collaborations. If you've ever thought about co-writing search out some local writing groups or place an ad in your local supermarket and see if you can find somebody on the same wavelength as yourself.

There are a couple of favourites in the comedy canon you should consider.

The individual comedy character around whom a sane world rotates.

OR

An ensemble of eccentric characters in a sane situation.

When we come to writing a movie screenplay we're really up against the big boys. A screenplay is akin to writing a full length novel and will take just as much time and application. Cinema is the visual big daddy. Don't say it, show it, the producer will scream, and this means you have to pare dialogue to the bone. This doesn't mean you can't have lengthy monologues, but they'd better have dramatic weight or they're going to get laughed out of court.

The best way to learn how to write a screenplay is to read a few. Quite a lot are available online to download. A fascinating exercise is to read the screenplay while watching the actual movie on DVD. If you don't get the process with that, you never will.

This Module has not really attempted to teach you anything, rather it is intended to open your eyes to all the media which you can write for.

Serious novel writers, for instance may scoff at comic book writers, but that profession too requires great skill.

As a comic book writer you are told by your editor how many pages you have for your story, and how many panels per page. You have to visualise what each panel will contain and be able to write it in a form which the artist can interpret. The writing of captions and dialogue also requires you to transmit your information in the briefest form possible. Certainly no long monologues here!

The comic book reader expects more in the way of graphics than words, but as you are instructing the artist, you can define what the graphic should roughly be.

So, think about writing for comics, as much as anything else. I deliberately haven't gone to the newest media such as computer games, because I have no experience of the form, but I would imagine that they too require writers to imagine, create and populate worlds and that's what you do.

## EXERCISES

I want this exercise to be fun and one that you do really for your own pleasure. There is learning involved, but it will be subliminal.

Select one of your favourite novels which has been translated into a motion picture. Go online and see if the movie screenplay is available for download. Read the novel, read the screenplay and watch the movie. Now write an essay (1,000 words) on how the novel has changed in the process of being transformed into a screenplay and then being filmed.

## MODULE 12 [Formatting]

Bear with me, almost at the end.

This is another short Module and you'll be glad to know there are no Exercises attached. This is basic information about the formats publishers, agents or commissioning editors require.

If you're delivering digitally, check that the format you are using can be read by the recipient.

Most people nowadays will expect submissions to be in Microsoft Word (.doc) format.

For novels, short stories or anything else to appear in print, set your point size at 12, your spacing at double line space and align left or fully justify.

For theatre the format is as follows :-

PATEL

Jassu, what are you doing here ? The reception is not due to start till three o' clock.

JASSU CHECKS HIS WATCH.

JASSU

But, it is three o' clock now, uncle.

PATEL

You are the chief guest, you fool, and it is your duty to be late. You will insult everybody if you are here on time.

JASSU

How late must I be?

PATEL

Oh, about fifteen minutes. You are only the chief guest after all, not one of the dignitaries. Have you been practising your poetry?

JASSU PULLS THE BOOK FROM HIS POCKET.

JASSU

It confuses me. This chap is laying the Rosabelle and she is gay.

PATEL GRABS THE BOOK FROM HIM.

PATEL

It is by Sir Walter Scott. An aristocrat. It is not your place to question such people.

For radio, as follows :-

Suitably powerful and vigorous music (Ride of the Valkyries or something); howling winds and crashing thunder.

VORGA: (exclaims) Hail, ye gods, and listen to my words. I come before you, a Prince of Pelthidor,  
Master of Volkrane, Holder of the Talisman of Shen-Derok. I Vorga, son of Rastak, the Soul Shredder.  
(speaking voice) Now you, Damak.

DAMAK: (exclaims) Hail, ye gods, and listen to my words. I come before you, Lord of the Night Realms, Victor of the Battle of Zildar, Terror of the Hergol. I Damak, son of Jakar, the Blood Scorcher. (speaking voice) Your turn now, stranger

JIM: (weakly exclaims) Umm, Hail, ye gods, and listen to my words. I come before you, a welder with an NVQ, a member of the bowling club, fined for speeding, twice. I Jim, son of Gladys.

VORGA/

DAMAK: Gladys?

JIM: I ..I .. never knew who my Dad was.

VORGA: Truly, a tragedy. Enough to crush a warrior's soul.

DAMAK: Aye, and sap his very strength. To carry such a burden. A loathsome destiny.

And a movie screenplay should look like this :-

DAVINA PULLS AWAY FROM THE COP WHO WAS HOLDING HER.

DAVINA

Hugh !

Time's up, Coop !

Destiny's calling !

Middle class housewife ?

Not wild enough ?

HUGH SHAKES HIS HEAD WILDLY, HOLDS UP HIS HANDS, SIGNALLING FOR HER TO STOP.

DAVINA

I am The Stormer !

DAVINA STARTS RUNNING TOWARDS HUGH.

AS SHE RUNS SHE STARTS SHEDDING HER CLOTHES, EVERY ITEM SEEMINGLY DESIGNED

TO FALL FROM HER BODY.

SHE STREAKS ACROSS THE GRASS, NAKED NOW, HER MANE OF RED HAIR FLYING OUT

BEHIND HER, LIT BY THE BURNING STORMER.

CRAWFORD REMAINS STANDING ON THE BENCH, HIS JAW HANGING.

SUDDENLY EVERYBODY COMES ALIVE AGAIN AND THE COPS TRY TO CATCH DAVINA.  
SHE IS TOO FAR AHEAD THOUGH, AND COMES TO A STOP FACING HUGH.  
HE NODS SLOWLY AND EMBRACES HER.  
THE BIKERS FORM A BARRIER AROUND THEM, AND AS THE POLICE APPROACH THEY  
GRAB THEIR OWN WEAPONS, IN THE SHAPE OF BIKE CHAINS AND TYRE LEVERS FROM  
THEIR BIKES. NOW IT IS THE POLICE WHO BACK OFF.  
HUGH REMOVES HIS COAT AND COVERS DAVINA WITH IT.  
HE CLIMBS ONTO MIDDEN'S BIKE AND SHE SITS ON THE PILLION, SIDE-SADDLE.  
SHE IS  
WRAPPED IN HIS COAT, HER RED HAIR BILLOWING. SHE PUTS HER ARMS ROUND HUGH.  
HE GUNS THE BIKE AND THEY ROAR OFF.  
BEHIND THEM, THE STORMER BURNS.

There, that wasn't too bad, was it? Gave you something interesting to read anyway.

### MODULE 13 [Editing]

Okay, you've sweated blood to get words on paper. You've burned the midnight oil to create. You are exhausted, destroyed, but ultimately fulfilled because you've finished. And now I tell you to tear it all up. Hate me? I don't blame you. But this is something you have to do. The art is in the editing, not the writing.

My system is this :-

*I write the material.*

*I go back in with the knife and edit. I'm brutal, words, sentences, paragraphs, even entire chapters are chopped.*

*I go back over the bleeding corpse and polish it to shine.*

Why go through this process, surely your words as they sprang from your fertile imagination are sacred?

Far from it, as you write you are too close to the moment and miss the bigger picture. Only when you have finished will you see what you have actually written and only then, when sufficient time has passed, will you see the extraneous material you have inserted or the points you have forgotten to make. You must be prepared to annihilate your favourite passages, no matter how much you love them, or how much you sweated over them.

I get clever with this process and save every passage I excise, because I might be able to use it elsewhere. It's plagiarising yourself, but it's not illegal and they can't touch you for it.

You can get somebody else to edit for you, but it will make you a lesser writer. You must know, when you hand over your script that it as good as you can make it. If it carries my name, I wrote it, from start to finish.

**I had the idea.  
I started writing.**

**I went back and plotted.  
I wrote the whole thing.  
I edited.  
I polished.**

It's a great thing, ego.

How do you tell good from bad? Again, a difficult question, but these are the things I'd check.

- (1) Spelling and grammar
- (2) Tense
- (3) Flow
- (4) Style
- (5) Pace

Only when I was happy that all these elements were as good as I could make them would I go back and polish.

Polishing is not particularly onerous, and can be quite fun. There is a serious purpose to it, but a sense of elation will engulf you because you're nearly at the finish line.

Polishing can be as simple as deciding that your main character doesn't really deserve the name of Theodore and would be better as Butch. That's easy enough to Find and Replace.

Look for things that jar and try to make things run smoothly.

Time is a huge factor in this. You must allow time to pass before you can go back to edit and polish. You must create some distance between you and the work. The brain needs time.

I am naturally impatient and have difficulty with this, but you should be prepared to go back and polish several times if necessary. You are the only judge, it's your work.

## EXERCISES

Take a major piece of at least 5,000 words you wrote at least a month ago and edit it. Leave it for a week and go back and polish.

Now, leave it for another week before seeing if you can do any further editing.

Detail the changes you have made in the two versions. Try to establish what changes you made and why.

## MODULE 14 [Marketing]

The time has come to sell your masterpiece. You've written it, edited and polished it and written a synopsis, so what now?

Depends what it is. A novel needs to end up with a publisher, a stage play with a theatre group, a radio or TV piece with a broadcaster and a screenplay with a production company.

My first port of call would be with the current Writer's and Artist's Yearbook, which is the bible for marketing the written word. If you don't have one, buy one, or get access to one at your local library. Every publisher and agent of worth is listed here. Establish exactly what kind of material you have written and what market it would appeal to. Does the publisher you want to submit to handle horror romances?

A letter with synopsis will save you postage costs but most publishers will give some guidelines within the Yearbook as to how they handle submissions. Don't try to outflank them with phone calls or personal appearances, you'll just piss them off. Most nowadays will accept submissions digitally, that is as an email attachment.

Nobody will steal your material. The minute it is written you hold the copyright and it isn't worth anybody's while to infringe it, certainly not if you're approaching a reputable company. If you're still nervous, email yourself with a copy of your work attached, but don't open it. This proves, at the least, that you had access to the material before anybody else.

There is no avoiding the fact that you'll have to wait for any response, possibly for months. This can be a killer, but the best thing you can do is to start work on your next project and forget about what you've just posted off.

With regard to agents, you're unlikely to find one willing to take you on until you have some kind of track record. You should write them a letter asking them to represent you, together with your CV or track record. It's best if you have a new piece of work for them to try and sell.

Please remember that publishers, agents, production companies, all, are commercial concerns, in the business of making money. If they think they can make money from your work they'll grab you with both hands, but they are loathe to take a gamble on an unproven writer or experimental work.

The day of the gentleman publisher, who considered publishing an author merely because he seemed like a nice chap are long gone. So, you have the challenge of not only creating brilliant material, but also convincing the potential buyer that it is brilliant. Modern technology has brought the writer new options in self-publishing.

Print On Demand (POD) can be arranged with specialist publishers for a fee. This means that your properly printed and bound books can be available to the public, but only when they want them. The publishers offer limited promotion, advertising or marketing. This is akin to vanity publishing.

To my mind the second option is more interesting, putting the writer in total control of the production and promotion of his book without costing him anything. This is in the form of ebooks.

Basically you write your material, convert it to an Adobe pdf file, design a cover, and sell it over the web. You'll need to learn a host of new skills though.

## EXERCISES

Get a copy of the Writer's & Artist's yearbook. You have just written a novel about a retired soldier's search for the widow of the man he shot during a battle during the Gulf War (I). See how many publishers you can find who publish a book such as this.

Now, go to a public library and in the fiction section look for books published by the publishers you have selected. Do any of the books match yours in any way?

## MODULE 15 [Tasks]

This Module gives you 5 writing tasks which you should be able to complete after reading the preceding Modules. Please complete them in your own time and enjoy the process.

### [1] CHARACTER

Write a 200 word sketch of a famous personality from the showbiz world. You should describe his/her physical attributes, particular skills and achievements.

Using the same physical attributes as above create a down-to-earth working class character, relating his disappointments in life. This should be 200 words in the first person.

## [2] DIALOGUE

Two characters sit across from each other at a table. Write a dialogue between the two which degenerates into an argument. One introductory paragraph can be descriptive, but the rest must be purely dialogue.

Format this with character names separated from dialogue. Minimum length for this is 400 words.

## [3] PLOT

Write a 500 word synopsis for a novel set during World War II, revolving around the first meeting of Russian and American troops outside Berlin.

OR

Write a 500 word synopsis for a novel about the love affair between two leading figures in opposing political parties.

OR

Write a 500 word synopsis for a novel about a police detective's search for the kidnapper of a sportsman's son.

## [4] NARRATIVE

Write a 300 word narrative about your first driving lesson. (This can be fictional)

OR

Write a 300 word narrative based on your experiences with the first love of your life.

## [5] STYLE

This Task requires you to detail the same event in two different writing styles. The event is as follows - A man and a woman are in a restaurant. They have had a relationship but have split up. Now they are trying to reconcile. How this resolves is up to you. Style 1 is fast-paced, sharp and snappy. Style 2 is more leisurely and perhaps emotionally charged. This requires 500 words for each style.

## CONCLUSION

So, here we are, my friend, at the conclusion of our little journey. If it has succeeded in its purpose you should now know a lot more than when you started, and should be ready to continue your writing career with renewed enthusiasm.

The knowledge you now have should give you the confidence to write anything. Sure, there's a lot more to learn, but life's like that, there's always more. And remember, once you've finished your masterpiece, let me have a look at it by going to the Submissions page at <http://ma2books.webplus.net>

### Extracts from newspaper reviews of some of Gurmeet Mattu's work.

#### CITIZEN SINGH

"Billy Connolly spiced with curry" - The Scotsman

#### SIEGE MENTALITY

"Mattu may well prove to be the voice of his generation" - The Scotsman

"His unfailing sense of humour sends up everything and everybody, including himself ... an inspired script by the talented Gurmeet Mattu" - Glasgow Herald



### COWBOYS & INDIANS

"The script itself is youthful, fantastical, verbally over-exuberant ... Mattu has created a quartet of thoroughly workable and believable characters ... the weird, exuberant, density of his language demonstrates beyond doubt that he has absorbed the unique rhythms and atmosphere of the city" -The Guardian

"This cheerfully fanciful tale of business derring-do and star-crossed romance brings together a thoughtful span of issues that relate to establishing one's own identity. Mattu's serious, sincere message would seem to be that the most important element in deciding who you are is to declare yourself a human being among other human beings"- Glasgow Herald

"Mattu approaches his subject with wit and sympathy. An intelligent, lively and funny play" - The List

### A MsSIAH

"There is good writing here" - Glasgow Herald

"Mr Mattu certainly does not shirk big issues"- The Scotsman

### SICK AS A PARROT

"What made this engaging small play was playwright Gurmeet Mattu's accurate ear for Glasgow speech and the neatly turned way in which he used the waywardness of adolescent devotion" - The Guardian

### THE STORMER

(from Long Story Short)

"Gurmeet Mattu provided the most rewarding theatrical experience - an off-beat romantic comedy, full of incident, colour and suspense" - Sunday Times

"Of particular note was the sketch by GurmeetMattu" - Edinburgh Evening News

"The richest vein of comedy was mined in 'The Stormer' by Gurmeet Mattu" - The Scotsman

### THE GIFTIE GIEN US

(from Scotland Matters)

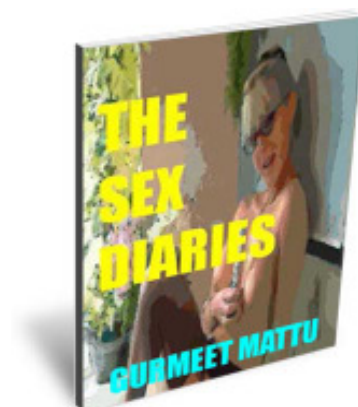
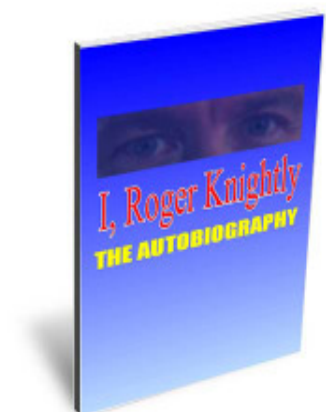
"... held its good wine to the last. Gurmeet Mattu, already an accomplished playwright, is somebody we will be hearing much more from. His cross-cultural influences give him strong insight into the Scottish scene. There is a full length play here. I look forward to it with relish. Perhaps 7:84 might find its soul by doing it" - Sunday Times

"Gurmeet Mattu's 'The Giftie Gien Us', wisely saved till last, is the only one to address the question of nationhood head-on, neatly balancing an allegorical love story with a typically 90's marketing campaign" - The List

"The idea of independence is finally confronted in Gurmeet Mattu's excellent 'The Giftie Gien Us" - Edinburgh Evening News



**Gurmeet Mattu's novel, The Stormer, is available in paperback from Amazon (ISBN 978-1849230179) or as an e-book from Ma2books (<http://ma2books.webplus.net>)**  
**His other novels, The Sex Diaries and I, Roger Knightly, are also available on the site.**



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