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Come in...and be captivated...

### [Writers' Craft Box](#)

What this section is intended to do:  
Give writers suggested hints,  
resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you  
feel is most helpful and derive  
inspiration from it- most importantly,  
**HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say  
you're doing an art project and you  
want to spice it up a bit. You reach  
into a seemingly bottomless box full  
of colorful art/craft supplies and  
choose only the things that speak to  
you. You take only what you need to  
feel that you've fully expressed  
yourself. Then, you go about doing  
you're individual project adding just  
the right amount of everything you've  
chosen until you reach a product that  
suits you completely. So, this is on  
that concept. Reach in, find the



"Arts and Crafts" N.M.B Copyright2008

things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Commenting on the creation of characters, one of our contributing writers, Alana Cash, shares her perspectives with us.

Alana Cash studied English literature at UCLA. She worked as a "reader" for a major literary agency before she began teaching at the University of Texas Informal Classes program. After two years of teaching, she was invited to participate in the PBS series on expository writing. She is an award-winning and published short story author and internationally published journalist.



"Put your boots up" N.M.B  
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"When I'm reading, too often I find that I cannot tell one character from another. Characters are created in two-dimensions, black and white, no gray areas. For example, all rich people in the story are terrible snobs with condescending dialogue. All teenage girls are Valley girls. No good qualities for the villain, and the hero/heroine is all innocence and goodness without internal conflicts or temptations.

I'm not saying that every character has to have a big flaw like drug addiction or cheating on tests, but they could have some quirks or phobias, and I don't mean this just for the sake of the plot. I mean that as you study your friends, acquaintances, coworkers, siblings, you know that they are not perfect. Some people are clumsy, some have not changed their hairstyle in two decades, some have food allergies or personal rituals.

Allow the character to unfold in the story. You do not need to fully describe your character in adjectives 'hot tempered, blue eyes, long nose, stock broker...' and you also needn't fully explain them in the first page of your story. You can intersperse the description along the way. I like stories that keep me questioning."

"I taught fiction writing to adults for 3 years and during that time I developed an 8-week course that followed a distinct format. I developed a 'writing workbook' using simple fill-in-the-blank exercises, and the most important exercise was on how to create believable characters. Every time I started a new class, we created one character as a group. Each person chose a

character as a group. Each person chose a character trait as we went around the room, and we continued doing this until the character came to life.

Here I present samples of the 4-step process for creating believable characters. This process is based mainly upon the experiences I had through my teaching course work and also loosely upon the book, *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri. Although Egri was writing for (and about) playwrights, his approach applies to prose writing as well.

The 4-step process featured below examines the physical being, the psychological/emotional being, the social being, and the character's history. The following are selected prompts from each of the four categories."

Use as many or as few of the prompts in each category as you choose to.

### **PHYSICAL BEING:**

PHYSICAL BUILD

HOW DOES THE CHARACTER MOVE? ANY SPECIAL TRAITS OR IDIOSYNCRASIES OF BODY LANGUAGE?

BEST FEATURE

WORST FEATURE

PHYSICAL WEAKNESS

SIGNS OF AGE

**SIGNS OF AGE**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL/EMOTIONAL BEING:**

AMBITION/GOALS

CREATIVITY (how expressed/repressed)

HUMOR (witty/droll/repressed)

HOBBIES

AMUSEMENTS (books/movies/music)

SPECIAL MENTAL ABILITIES/TALENTS

IDIOSYNCRASIES/NEUROSES/COMPULSIONS

GRUDGES/RESENTMENTS

ANGER (how expressed)

GREATEST SUCCESS

WORST FAILURE

WORST DISAPPOINTMENT

*SECRET FEAR- what is the deepest and most secret fear that this character has (examples are- fear of crying or showing emotion in public, fear of being found out for some terrible habit like embezzling, etc.)*

HAS THIS CHARACTER EVER BEEN IN LOVE? IF NOT, WHY NOT? IF SO, WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

**SOCIAL BEING:**

FAMILY- DESCRIBE EACH FAMILY MEMBER AND THE RELATIONSHIP THAT THE CHARACTER HAS WITH THEM

HOME ENVIRONMENT

PETS

DESCRIPTION OF RESIDENTIAL DWELLING-FURNITURE STYLE/DÉCOR

RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHERS AT WORK/SCHOOL

WORK/SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

### **CHARACTER'S HISTORY**

DESCRIBE THE CHARACTER'S CHILDHOOD (earliest memories, traumas, favorite memories, best friends, school or lack of, etc.)

DESCRIBE THE CHARACTER'S ADOLESCENCE (emotional and physical experiences, embarrassing moments, ways the character tried to be different from or same as peer group, etc.)

WHAT ENVIRONMENT HAS THIS CHARACTER FAILED TO CREATE AT HOME OR AT WORK?

**Recommended Reading:** *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, by Lajos Egri

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On Setting

By Denise Rouchard

By DENISE BOUCHARD

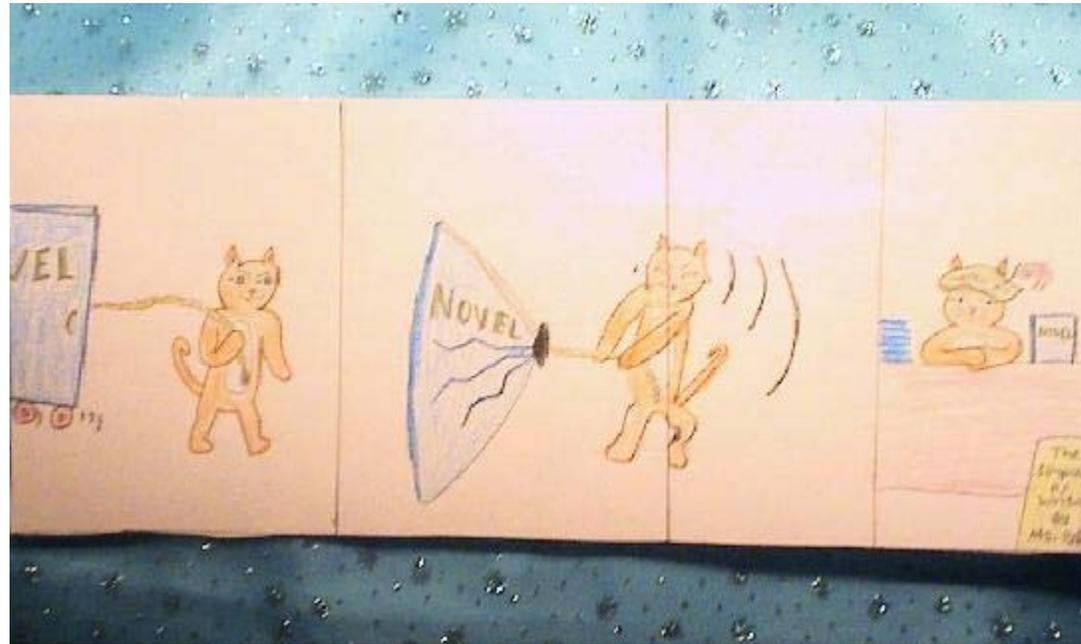
A few years ago while I was in the area, I took a course at Brown University on creative writing. The teacher was adamant that you must visit the location which you are writing about.

For the most part, my story takes place in my home state. The rest of the locale is so exotic that it seemed a very expensive endeavor to travel to a place which I thought I knew enough of through research and reading.

Regardless, I heeded the advice and packed my bags. I cannot begin to say how much going there changed the life blood of the book. There were unique experiences that took place on our trip, even comical misfortunes singular to the location that breathed reality onto the pages and changed not only the book's soul, but my own as well.

I never would have understood the way this locale handled difficult situations with a 'I'll-get-to-it-someday...Relax-and-have-a-drink-instead' frame of mind. I wouldn't have known that the sights people local to the area take for granted every day are scenes that would amaze us. I took in the sounds of both the city and the rural sections, the pleasant exotic scents, the fresh unusual tastes, and the feelings of the mysterious, unseasonable winds.

From making me laugh to sending a jolt to jump-start my creativity, the universe took me by the hand and led me to the heart of my book. Thus, I can say from experience that knowing your setting intimately brings you far closer to the core of your story's authenticity.



"Ms. Hyde the Writing Guide on the Simplicity of Writing" N.M.B Copyright 2008



"Trackside Tree" Christopher Woods Copyright 2008

## Modern Muses

By Nicole M. Bouchard

The Greek Muses dance into the artist's life in many ways. As a writer, my modern muses involve using different artistic mediums to employ the senses and creating an inspiring work space.

Though I find writing exercises to be very helpful in stimulating my creativity, sometimes I find that listening to unusual music, sitting on the floor and making a

themed collage, or making a fine mess with paint will not only spark new inspiration, but it reminds me to be grounded in one of the essential writing components which is sensory detail. Be it pottery, cooking, gardening, drawing or otherwise, engage in activities outside your main artistic discipline for a 360 degree perspective.

This next source of inspiration involves the work space. Often a rootless writer, I could roam to almost any spot and balance a notebook on my lap. If I could have hung upside down from a tree limb like a sloth and written with a pen in my mouth, I might have. However, having one main designated space is far more conducive to longer, larger writing work. I've interviewed artists and writers in the past about the space which they create in. For some, a desk with a beautiful water view induces inspiration. For others, it has be a blank wall that they face in order to leave the real world behind and step inside the environment of their imagination. It is different for everyone. Some people like to go with Feng Shui, others like a classic look with an elegant desk, leather chair and bookshelves. The main thing to keep in mind is whether

the space *fits you*. It should remain uncluttered, allowing the ideas to run freely, and it should have an organization to it. If there is a method to your messiness, go for it, but having what you need be easily accessible is always a plus. Keep plenty of paper, pens (though they seem to disappear in an other worldly way- *somewhere there must be a whole planet of philandering pens...*) and perhaps even an inspiration drawer/folder with motivating pictures/painting prints, story concept notes you've scribbled down on napkins, quotes, poems and whatever else stirs your creative spirit. Whether it's plain, bizarre, or a disappearing and reappearing spot on the kitchen table, finding a main place to ground yourself helps to get more done and it states to yourself that you are serious about doing something just for you.

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### From the Beginning...

The first sentence to a short story or novel can be the determining factor of whether a reader stays along for the ride or puts the book down. That said, amazing novels have had less than impressive starts. Yet for the most part, that

starts. yet for the most part, that first sentence can inflame the reader's imagination and draw them into the story like a magnet. I've always loved first sentences that posed questions or made me really ponder something. As an avid reader, I can think of many incredible first sentences I've read, but here I'll only mention a few.

*The Hours* by Michael Cunningham- It isn't just the first sentence but the whole beginning discussing Virginia Wolf's suicide as though it was a quick trip to the corner store for milk and bread. The author takes something powerful and tragic, and describes it as something mundane and neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It is a shocking and unexpected approach to the scene. I'll never quite forget that unusual beginning which I read on an airplane, soaring in a surreal layer of wispy white clouds.

*Practical Magic* by Alice Hoffman- Immediately you have a million questions. Who are the Owens women? Why are they blamed for the misfortune of the town? You are curious and yet you can feel the pain of their persecution. In only a few words, the reader is taken in.

*Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden- The whole first paragraph engages the reader as if they were in a conversation with the protagonist. It is an interactive passage anticipating the reader's thoughts and answering their questions. It sets up a scene of drinking green tea and wondering how the day the protagonist met someone could be the worst and best day of their life. It is comparing two opposites in an unusual way.

These are wholly wonderful books and these choices showcase only three examples of amazing beginnings. They are unusual, personal, and unexpected. Most of my favorite books have dynamic first sentences.

A whole story can be spun from one great sentence.

**Recommended Reading:** *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham, *Practical Magic* by Alice Hoffman, and *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden

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On Description

There is much to describe when talking about description. In a most basic explanation, the reader has to believe. To get them to believe and become an integral part of the story, they must be able to imagine the world they are in and trust it as they trust their senses.

In *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt, the character Jim Williams has the mysterious nature of his personality conveyed by his eyes being compared to the tinted windows of a limousine. It is a clear image for the reader to associate with and it says a great deal without the writer having to go on for pages. Simply and cleanly, we get it.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, we see the French Police Captain's hairline compared to the prow of a battleship. Right there, we can not only envision him, but we have a major hint/feeling about his personality.

In *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch, we see an artistic portrayal of every place and person that the protagonist encounters. We are there even when we're afraid to be

and at the end, we "...always know what time it is in California..." too. It is made that clear through unconventional, artful description that truly makes us use our imagery imagination.

In *Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, we feel like we know those characters. They are alive in appearance and mannerism in addition to their actions.

In *My House in Umbria* by William Trevor, we have checked into the protagonist's house for the weekend. We are there easily in the Italianate beauty of the house and might feel jet lagged at the end of the book because it had seemed like we really took a trip.

Again, these are only a few examples. Yet description can be a beautiful, essential tool to convey not only the aesthetic, but even the deeper psychological components of the story and its characters.

**Recommended Reading:** *The Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch, *Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and *My House in Umbria* by William Trevor.

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