Flogging the Quill

Crafting a Novel that Sells

Ray Rhamey

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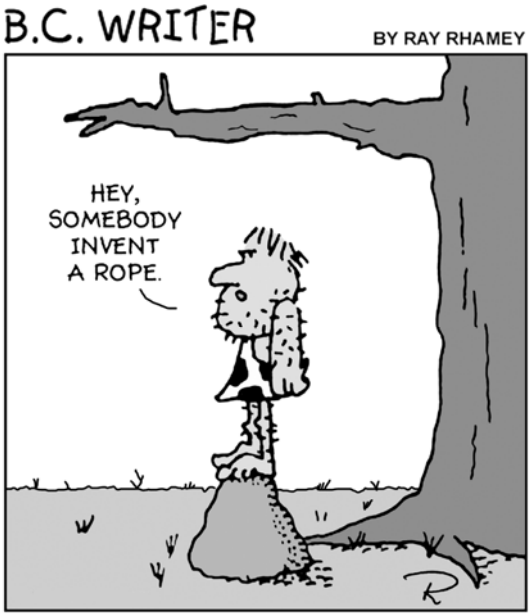
Contents

"A masterpiece of *showing* how to fix prose, not merely *telling*."

Chris, writer



As if rejection weren't enough.

This book is dedicated to writers who are climbing the steep and never-ending learning curve for writing novels, seeking and striving to learn and improve.

And to the "litblogosphere," the writer/editor/agent bloggers who inform us and teach us, and to those who once did but have faded away (we miss you, Mad Max Perkins and Fresh Eyes and Miss Snark).

It's a thank-you to agents such as Donald Maass and editors such as Dave King and Rennie Browne who write books to share insights that help us become more successful and better writers.

It's a thank-you to the writers I've worked with in critique groups who have helped me with my own writing and in learning how to coach writers over their story's weak spots.

And the biggest thank-you goes to my wife, Sarah, who has been a patient listener for, well, all the important times, and some not so consequential—the companion of my life.

It's harsh out there

Today's publishing climate is tougher than ever. To get an agent, your work has to stand out from hundreds and hundreds of submissions. For your agent to get you a book contract, your novel has to cut through hundreds more.

Your book has to be polished, sharp, and a rarity–you not only have to have professional-caliber writing and a great story, your novel needs to kick-start with compelling tension.

You only have seconds in an agent's hands

Established authors can take their time to ease into a story with description and mood (and even they aren't safe in the bookstore), but unpublished writers face a very different reality—agents suffering through heaps of submissions looking for reasons to reject while at the same time hoping for a story worth reading.

On her blog, *Agent in the Middle,* 20-year veteran agent Lori Perkins said this:

> Your novel has to grab me by the first page, which is why we can reject you on one page.

"I know most of what I need to know about a writer's chops in about a line and half."

Dan Conaway, literary agent, Writers House

The odds are excellent that an agent will see all the reasons she needs for passing—or for reading more—on your first manuscript page. Just like agents and editors who see rivers of submissions, as a result of seeing hundreds of opening pages for novels, I can tell you that the first page typically foreshadows what's to come, story-wise and writing-wise. One quick skim usually provides all the reason I need to decide whether I will turn the page or decline the opportunity.

Often I see competent writing that fails to connect because the writer doesn't get what the novel's opening *must* do to hook a reader. Frequently I find a gripping opening pages later—too late. Most often a bog of exposition or backstory—what one writer calls "throat-clearing"—drags the story to a halt.

You still only have seconds on an editor's desk

Let's say you do land an agent, and the agent sends your story to an acquisitions editor. The same grim reality opens its maws—an audience of one with sharp, particular tastes who has an agenda that your story may or may not fit, who wants a great story but has a pile of submissions to go through, and for whom quickly finding a reason to pass is a good thing. One slip, and chomp, you're gone.

You still only have seconds at the bookstore

Okay, so your talent and work and luck pay off and your novel is published. Now it faces the cold, pragmatic reality of the bookstore. Sol Stein, a remarkable publisher/editor/author/playwright, writes in *Stein on Writing* of his observations in a bookstore.

"No [bookstore] browser went beyond page three. . ."

Sol Stein, publisher

> In the fiction section, the most common pattern was for the browser to read the front flap of the book's jacket and then go to page one. No browser went beyond page three before either taking the book to the cashier or putting it down and picking up another to sample.

What did those readers see in the novels they chose to purchase, and what did they fail to see in the rejects?

You know.

Ask yourself what readers buy novels for. Is it. . .

- Lush descriptions?
- Great dialogue?
- Fascinating characters?
- Deep themes?

Nope. Just one thing.

Story

Those bookstore browsers—and the agent and editor before them—either saw signs of a story they wanted to read, or they did not. They either felt compelled to keep reading, or not. That quickly. You do it too, don't you?

> "You can usually tell after a paragraph—a page, certainly—whether or not you're going to get hooked."
>
> Chuck Adams, Executive Editor
> Algonquin Books

It's not like when you ask a family member, or a friend, or even a critique group to read your new novel—they have to read your stuff.

No, in the real world, you have a page or two. And if it's that difficult with a bookstore browser who is on the hunt for a story to read, how tough do you think it is with a jaded, weary agent or a jaded, way-too-swamped acquisitions editor?

To move your book toward the cash register. . .or generate a request by an agent for the full manuscript. . .or make it to an editorial meeting by an acquisitions editor. . .you need to kick-start your story, sentence by sentence, on your opening pages.

And then you have to keep pages turning

Beyond openings, this book tackles the art and craft that you need in order to focus every facet of your talent on compelling a reader to turn pages.

1: Storytelling

Coaching on the art of storytelling—motivating characters, creating tension, gripping your readers so they want to keep reading, and reading, and reading—so you get a feel for what your narrative must do to capture readers and to make the story live in their minds. Then come craft tools you'll utilize to make your story happen on the page.

2: Description

One of the most powerful, yet underutilized (or, sadly, sometimes overutilized) tools for a novelist is description. I'll show you how to create de-

scription that not only describes, but characterizes. You'll write description that does far more than produce a simple snapshot of a scene or an action.

3: Dialogue

The other key tool for injecting life into your story is dialogue. You'll see how to craft dialogue that delivers the experience of a scene smoothly, clearly, and powerfully.

"To hold our attention, a novel's action needs to compel us to read every word."

Donald Maass, agent and author
Writing the Breakout Novel

4: Technique

I'll illustrate a toolbox of craft techniques that include the all-important show/tell dichotomy and its impact on your story. I'll cover point of view, head-hopping, and flashbacks.

5: Words

How well you create a story experience in a reader's mind depends on the words you use—and don't use. Are adverbs truly *verboten*, or can they be your friend? What are the weak words that sap power from your narrative?

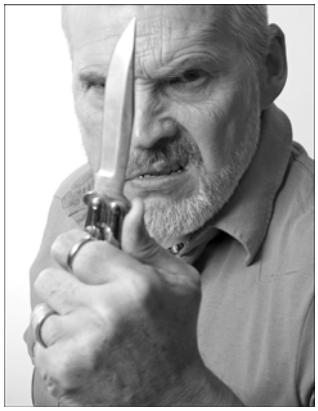
6: Workouts

Finally, you go to work applying the techniques and insights you've gained to real novel openings created by writers like you.

If this book does no more than guide you to focus on and to see the true effect and impact of your writing, it will have boosted you several rungs up the ladder to creating a publishable novel.

Last, but not least, I suggest you consider posting the definition below somewhere within sight at your place of writing.

com•pel
verb
a: to force
b: to urge irresistibly



Are you writing for effect?

Here's the effect I want your writing to have on me—I want it to trigger in me the sights and sounds and smells of what's happening. I don't want approximations, I want that *reality*. I want to experience the story, not just learn about what happens. And I want it to be effortless—I should be able to react without having to stop and think about the stimuli you put on a piece of paper. (That is not to say that good writing doesn't give you something to think about.)

Writing for effect is the core principle underlying my approach to creating an irresistible fiction narrative that immerses a reader in the experience of the story.

It's the lens through which I critique narrative in an edit and strive to view my own writing.

It's the objective that informs the coaching on storytelling, dialogue, description, and technique in this book.

It's knowing how to show and when to tell. It's why adverbs are often weak writing—and sometimes not.

It is the guiding light that can show you the way to a stronger story, and the searchlight that can illuminate shortcomings in your manuscript.

Failure to write for effect is why too many writers, especially beginning novelists, do little more than put information on the page and end up with little more than a report with a plot.

In storytelling, you're not writing to inform the reader—you deliver information, of course, but that's not the purpose—you're writing to ***affect*** the reader. To craft narrative that creates an ***effect*** in the reader's mind—the experience of the story.

Stimulus/response

Maybe it's the psychology major in me, but I can't help but think of the stimulus/response paradigm. Pavlov taught dogs to expect food when he rang a bell, and thereafter the dogs salivated at the sound of that bell.

You, the writer, produce a stimulus. The reader provides the response, imagining a scene or an action or an emotion. Actually, there's a reader element involved that a writer can't address—the reader's personal filters and baggage. A dog not trained to associate feeding with a bell won't salivate at the sound of one. For readers, as an elementary example, the word "cat" has a different effect on a cat lover than it does on a cat hater. You can't control that, but you can still load your narrative gun with the best possible ammo.

In practice, the workings of stimulus/response aren't simple, but they are the keys to writing for effect, and understanding that can open the door to successful storytelling.

You begin a story with a single stimulus—a word. Here's one now:

> Vladimir's

Most words can't do much by themselves, so you string more words into a sentence that forms a different stimulus.

> Vladimir's blade cut Johnson's throat, and Vladimir smiled.

Change one or two words, and the effect is different.

> Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat, and Vladimir smiled.

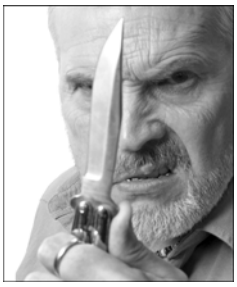
To my mind, *sliced open* is far more evocative than *cut*.

Another part of the effect here is to characterize Vladimir—for some reason, he enjoyed slicing open a man's throat. And this sentence raises story questions: Why did he slice the throat, and why did he smile? All that from just one sentence of nine words.

Although we're writing for effect, and the accumulating stimuli produce a dramatic portrayal of what's happening, it doesn't yet reach the level of deli-

vering the experience of the story. The experience comes through the character.

Vladimir is the point-of-view character, but this narrative is objective so far, a camera's view. Novels provide a unique way to create an experience—*showing* what's happening in a character's mind.



> Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat. The child-killer toppled, hands clutching his neck. Vladimir watched him writhe, and then become still. The bittersweet taste of vengeance filled Vladimir, and he smiled.

Your sentences accrue and, done well, coalesce into a greater stimulus—the story. The final result, the effect on your reader, begins with the word choices you make and how you put them together.

How you arrange words to affect your reader demands professional techniques aimed at maximizing the power of your narrative to create an experience for your reader. We'll dig into techniques that help you do just that.

Benchmark

At the end of this book are ten "workouts" where I ask you to apply the coaching herein to samples sent to me by writers. Below is one of the examples you'll be working on, the opening sixteen lines of a novel sent to me by an Australian writer (note the British punctuation).

To create a benchmark for changes in how you perceive a narrative after reading this book, I suggest you read it now, evaluate its strengths and shortcomings, and think about how you would edit it and/or what comments you would give the writer. Then carry on.

> 'Michael's gone!' Julia screamed into the payphone outside Flinders Street Train Station.
>
> 'Calm down, Mrs Stewart. She'll be with you shortly.'
>
> Julia bristled at the matter-of-factness of the receptionist's voice. 'I don't care if she's with the Queen. My husband is missing. I think I'm losing my mind.'
>
> 'Please hold and I'll see if I can interrupt.'
>
> Click. Mozart replaced the receptionist's voice. The familiar hold music from the past sounded surreal against the background tram and traffic noise of the Melbourne thoroughfare.
>
> A pedestrian bumped into her daughter's stroller, turning Shellie to tears.

'Stop that, you bad girl!' Julia rolled the stroller under the phone box, putting her child out of the way of the Friday afternoon commuters.

Shellie reached out and cried louder.

'Arrgghh!' Julia dropped the receiver, picked up the three year old and settled her on her hip. Shellie quieted, distracted now by an earring.

Ignoring her, Julia reached for the dangling receiver, and found silence. 'Hello? Hello!' *Don't be gone. I don't have any more change.*

'I thought I'd lost you.' The receptionist's cheerfulness was enough to piss off anyone.

"I was at once impressed, delighted and amused. Your insights into the writing process are dead on!"

Steven Gillis, *Walter Falls* and *The Weight of Nothing*

Section 1: Storytelling

Telling a story seems like a simple enough proposition: just set down what happens.

But to be a published novelist, telling your tale can't be what you'd do settin' on the porch and jawing about what happened to Uncle Abner back in '98, no sirree. It has to be compelling. (On the other hand, if we're talking about how Uncle Abner single-handedly defeated the attack of the space aliens. . .hmmmm.)

What makes a story compelling? How do you make it compelling? This first section takes up the story side of writing a novel, the thinking and planning and conceptualizing and imagining you have to do to reach a publishable level of story.

There are no magical answers, no one formula that you can input with characters and events that sums to a compelling story. This is an art, after all.

And there are no rules, either. If you do the opposite of everything advised in this book, but in doing so you create the experience of a compelling story, that's great.

No rules, no magical answers. . .but there are ways to think about how to craft what happens that create tension in your story, the necessary ingredient that forces readers to turn pages.

Storytelling

Story as river

A tale of two stories:

Enticed by a friend's recommendation, Ima Reader takes a seat in a punt on the shore of a gentle English river. The flat-bottom boat rocks a little, but she feels safe in the hands of Heezan Author, who stands ready at the stern, hands on the long pole used to push the boat. His photo on the back of the book was nice.

Heezan shoves off, and they glide down the river on an easy-going current. Heezan says, "Note the lovely hues of red and gold in the rose garden on the far bank." He steers the bow a few degrees toward the near shore. "And here is the poor peasant hut, its thatched roof more holes than not, where our hero was born, poor tyke, the sad victim of—"

"Oh, the hero. I'm so eager to see him." Ima leans forward and peers ahead.

"Soon enough, soon enough, Dear Reader. But first, see the ramshackle one-room schoolhouse where Hero first met Heroine, though their meeting was a tussle over who got the swing—"

Ima turns to Heezan. "Excuse me, sir…"

A sigh. "Yes?"

"Pull over to the bank, please."

"But there's so much story to be told."

The boat clunks against a dock and Ima steps out. "Too late." She gently closes the covers, never to return.

OR…

Feeling the pull of a fetching blurb, Ima Reader turns to page one and drops into a river raft. It races downstream, toward the roar of water churning over rocks. The raft noses around a bend, and ahead spray creates a mist above roiling water and granite boulders.

Sheezan Author, both hands with strangle-holds on the rudder at the rear, shouts, "I don't want to alarm you, but there are crocodiles between us and the end."

Ima grips a page. Her lips stretch in a grin of anticipation when she leans forward and says, "Let 'er rip!"

What if Ima Reader is an agent to whom you've just submitted a sample, and yours is the eleventy-eleventh submission she's opened that week?

Or an acquisitions editor at a publishing firm who wonders why in hell he agreed to look at your manuscript?

Or a bookstore browser deciding on what to buy for a weekend read (and your book is in that narrow window of only a few weeks to catch hold and create an audience)? These people turn to page one looking for one thing.

To be swept away.

And effortlessly, too. After all, the agent's tired, it's been a hard week, she's looked at dozens of crappy novels, and it's an act of will to tackle another one. The editor feels a migraine coming on, and the bookstore browser just had her transmission go out. Please, capture my mind and imagination and take me away from all this.

But how does a story do that? The story river readers want to ride races down mountain slopes, hurtles around sharp bends to reveal unexpected events, plunges into canyons and out again until a killer waterfall comes into view. Then it sweeps them over, they plunge and crash into the maelstrom of the story's climax, and then emerge into calm waters, safe and satisfied.

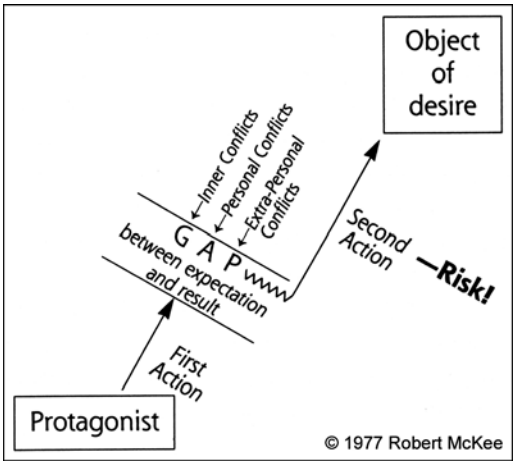
But how does an author sweep a reader along? The reader isn't in a craft pulled by a rope, nor propelled by oars or a motor. Instead, her imagination becomes one with the flow of the river.

What determines the nature of that flow? What lack makes it an easy-going stream, what element makes it a roller-coaster ride?

For a river, gravity furnishes passive power with inevitable pull. Where does the power of a story come from?

The gap

Screenwriter/story guru Robert McKee has a terrific way of thinking about what powers a story. Years back, I attended one of his intensive seminars on screenwriting, and I wish now I'd been ready to understand everything he had to offer. A brilliant screenwriter and story thinker, McKee nails what creates the ever-increasing rush of current in a story. In his book, *Story*, he calls it the "gap." While he writes primarily about screenwriting, he does talk about novels, and his insights are all about story, no matter what the form. This diagram from his book illustrates the gap.



A character has an object of desire. That could be a treasure, a job, a person, catching a killer, anything. He takes action—risky action—to get it…but he doesn't succeed because of inner, personal, or external conflict. A gap opens between the character and his goal.

But he still wants what he wants—or, better, needs what he needs. So he takes a second action, one with greater risk. But again he is frustrated, and must try again. McKee says each effort should involve more risk; each time there should be more for the character to lose. Causes of the gap—the thing that stymies the protagonist—can even be things that seem pleasant, even the achievement of a similar goal…but underneath, like the current in the river, there's still that need that isn't satisfied.

So look at your story, especially the opening. Are you poling your reader down a lazy river, talking amiably about scenery and backstory? Or about to run the rapids only seconds after she boards?

The rapids don't, of course, have to be physical, as in an adventure story. They can be caused by internal conflict. They can be emotional, or interpersonal, or…hey, whatever your imagination desires.

A river is not all rapids

Your story river needs the tension of rapids to keep compelling readers forward, but keep in mind that a river, just as a story, needs eddies and calm pools, too. Without them, the traveler can be exhausted. Without them, the story cannot gather its energy for another run. Moments of calm serve to create more tension if your story has let the reader know—through your use of the gap—that all is not yet well.

But your river must still MOVE! When I write scenes and chapters, I don't consciously apply McKee's gap technique before writing. But my sense of that underlying mechanism is becoming more and more ingrained in me, more of the rudder that steers my characters deeper and deeper into complications.

And I think "the gap" can be a terrific diagnostic tool. If your story feels lazy, or sags somewhere along the line, look at what is (and isn't) happening—does the character desire something, does he strive for it, is he blocked and forced to try again, to try something new at greater and greater risk?

Use "the gap" to help create irresistible pull for the river of your story.