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The Marshall Plan[®]

Fiction Makeover

52 Ways to Instantly Improve Your Novel

Evan Marshall

Co-author of *The Marshall Plan[®] for Novel Writing Template Generator*

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Pine Brook, New Jersey, USA
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Evan Marshall

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To aspiring fiction writers everywhere

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Why a Fiction Makeover?	1
1. Viewpoint Character Writing	2
2. Technical Tips	9
3. Section Connectors	18
4. The Action Writing Mode	22
5. The Summary Writing Mode	26
6. The Dialogue Writing Mode	31
7. The Feelings/Thoughts Writing Mode	44
8. The Background Writing Mode	46
9. Writing Dramatically	53

Introduction

Why a Fiction Makeover?

It seems more people than ever want to write a book. Specifically, a novel. A blockbuster novel.

You can't really blame them. They read stories in newspapers, magazines, and newsletters about seven-figure deals made by absolute newcomers. Never mind that these stories are the exceptions to the rule, and that the average advance for a first novel is still under \$10,000—often *well* under. Many aspiring writers know this statistic but don't care. *Why can't I be the exception?* they think. They can, of course, and once in a while they are. I say more power to them.

The point, though, is that whatever the reason, greater and greater numbers of manuscripts are working their way through the already overburdened postal system. At my literary agency, for example, the number of submissions has quadrupled over the last five years.

The same would go for publishing houses if most of them hadn't instituted a no-unagented-submissions rule. (This rule is, of course, partly responsible for the rise in submissions to literary agencies.)

Publishing professionals, mostly agents, must now plow through more material than ever before to find the gems suitable for publication. This means we must—and do—say no more often. It's simple math. The reality is that although

the volume of submissions has increased, the number of gems, sadly, has not.

Over the past few years, speaking to my literary agent colleagues, I've come to realize that a result of this phenomenon is that we all, in a manner of speaking, are looking for reasons to say no. In the interest of self-defense and survival, we have had to find a more efficient way of separating the "glow" from the "throw" than laboriously reading everything that fills those post-office baskets. So we look for the giveaways—the telltale signs of inferior writing.

In effect, then, what gets you through the first agency or publisher door is more often than not what you *don't* do than what you *do*. That's sad, because so often a don't-do could easily be corrected, a simple mistake made by someone who doesn't know any better. Why doesn't this person know any better? Because no one's told him.

I'm here to tell you—both what to do and what not to do. This entire book is made up of ideas that will help you improve your writing and jump those hurdles standing before the gate itself.

Once you've mastered the techniques in this book, you'll be much farther along the road to successful publication than the majority of aspiring writers out there. My goal is to help you make it all the way.

Chapter 1

Viewpoint Character Writing

Viewpoint writing is writing that filters everything in your story through the perceptions of the viewpoint character of a given section (a unit of text in The Marshall Plan® writing system). The reader knows only what the viewpoint character knows, sees what he sees, hears what he hears, and so on. Likewise, the reader is given only descriptions as they would naturally occur to the viewpoint character.



Describing People

There are three instances in which it's important to describe a character, and in each of these instances you do so using viewpoint writing.

■ **TIP 1: Provide the most comprehensive description of a character at the time that character is first introduced.**

But don't describe the character down to every mole and pimple; leave something to the reader's imagination. What should you describe? The characteristics that are most striking to your viewpoint character. There needn't be many; sometimes two or three details can create a vivid picture in a reader's mind. Some novelists describe a character only at the introduction and never again.

After some minutes and the laborious rattle of an anti-burglar chain, the door opened six inches. A pair of bright eyes examined him. "Yes?"

. . . Three minutes later the door opened wide and Mrs. Ledbetter gestured him into the living-room. She was well into her seventies with a leathery skin and a no-nonsense look about her . . .

The Ice House, by Minette Walters

Bright eyes, well into her seventies, leathery skin, a no-nonsense look. That's all we're told, but we get the picture. These are the details about Mrs. Ledbetter that our viewpoint character notices first. (Consider that what a character notices says something about that character's sensibilities; so your choice of details actually builds characterization.)



■ **TIP 2: Describe a character when his appearance at this particular stage of your story is important.**

In the following passage, Chris is captivated by Alexander, whom she hasn't seen in six years and who has grown into a handsome man. This change in Alexander is important, so the author describes him.

. . . She went downstairs, and just as she got there she saw Alexander coming in the door.

She couldn't catch her breath. He was more beautiful than ever; changed in these six lost years from a boy to a man. He was wearing an elegantly cut dark gray flannel suit, his dark hair curled over his ears, and she thought: Heathcliff. He could be a movie star, or even a young diplomat, or what he

was, a rising young banker. . .

Class Reunion, by Rona Jaffe



■ **TIP 3: Describe a character when her appearance has changed in a significant way.**

At the door she paused and drew a deep breath. Then she stepped boldly into the room. “Sam—”

Not Sam.

Hedra.

. . . She was wearing Allie’s expensive blue dress from Altman’s, with the silver belt, silver shoes, and even Allie’s dangling silver earrings with the cubic zirconia stones. Transformation. Night-on-the-town time.

Single White Female, by John Lutz

In this novel, Hedra, Allie’s roommate, gradually steals Allie’s identity. In this brief passage, Lutz has shown, by means of a few carefully chosen details, Allie’s shocked reaction to Hedra’s changed appearance.



Describing Places

In newbie manuscripts you often find descriptions of every room, every street, every piece of terrain—until you want to scream! Avoid newbie syndrome by keeping these tips in mind.

■ **TIP 4: Don't describe what doesn't need describing, as in the cases of places we've all been or places we've all seen.**

Cardozo arrived at Doctors Hospital a little after seven in the morning. His shield got him past the guard and he found Babe Devens's room.

“Mrs. Devens?”

The woman sitting in the cranked-up hospital bed gazed at him with extraordinarily large blue eyes. “Yes?”

Privileged Lives, by Edward Stewart

We've all seen a hospital room—no need to describe it. Besides which, the room's appearance is unimportant to this section of the novel; what's important is Cardozo and Mrs. Devens's exchange.



■ **TIP 5: Do describe a place your viewpoint character has never been (unless it's a place we've all been or seen; see Tip 4 above).**

Use only a few well-chosen details: features your viewpoint character would notice first.

. . . Christy went upstairs to find Nona whistling cheerfully in the kitchen. The front windows drew Christy to the tremendous spread of mountains that rimmed the deep cut of this little valley. Its sloping folds of meadow showed red wherever the earth was bare of grass, and cattle were already browsing where green came through. Here the trees had been banished to the high, blue-green mountains, and to isolated clumps that separated the houses along this ridge. . . .

Rainbow in the Mist, by Phyllis A. Whitney

Whitney could have told us much more about the kitchen and the view, but the details she's chosen create a complete picture because our imagination paints in the rest.



■ **TIP 6: Describe a place if it has changed in an important way.**

If you take your viewpoint character somewhere she’s already been, describe it again only if it has changed in a significant way. For instance, a room may look different because furniture has been moved, or an object added or removed; or it may look more opulent, or more run-down, than when the character last saw it. A change would even include a new feeling the character gets from this place. In the following passage, the place has changed because an important event is going on.

Ursula, Celia and Simkin arrived home on the day after Julian started his flight. As they passed through Easebourne they saw Cowdray. The beautiful palace lay just ahead, its many windows twinkling like diamonds, and they heard gay music wafting from the colored pavilions, swarming with gaily dressed folk in crimson, green and crocus yellow.

“Why, ’tis our Cowdray festival time!” Ursula cried gladly. “I’d quite forgot.”

Green Darkness, by Anya Seton



■ **TIP 7: Whenever possible, work your setting description into your characters’ actions.**

Rather than simply telling us how a place looks, work that description into the fabric of the story—ideally, into action involving the viewpoint character himself.

Hendricks started eastward. The wet sand felt crisp and cool on his feet. He walked with his head down and his hands in his pockets, looking at the tiny shells and tangles of seaweed. A few bugs— they looked like little black beetles—skittered out of his path, and when the wavewash receded, he saw minute bubbles pop above the holes made by the sandworms. . . .

Jaws, by Peter Benchley

The description of the beach is delivered subtly and naturally because it is woven into the action of the character, Hendricks.



Describing Things

■ **TIP 8: As with describing places, tell us how something looks only if it's something we haven't seen before or if it's something whose appearance we would have no way of knowing.**

If it's something we're familiar with, skip the description and just tell us what it is: a bathtub, a paperback, a window.

He kissed her, then told the driver to take them to UN Plaza. His apartment was modern and expensive, a Corbusier chaise longue upholstered in spotted pony skin, couches and chairs covered with soft black leather, the lights dim, wall-to-wall industrial carpeting—a powerful man's retreat. . . .

Punish Me With Kisses, by William Bayer

In the above passage it's important that we get a description of the apartment. She's never seen it before, and the details Bayer gives about it also reveal its resident's personality.



■ **TIP 9: If you're describing something that is actually made up of a number of separate elements (a**

crowd, a flower garden, a city street), name the object first, then focus on a telling detail or two.

The crowd was a motley assortment of satin-gowned ladies, languid sauntering young fops, brisk men-of-business hurrying along with an air of having weighty problems to solve, soldiers in uniform, country squires and their wives. Amber could easily recognize these latter for they all wore clothes hopelessly out of fashion—boots, when no gentleman would be seen off his horse in them; high-crowned hats like a Puritan's, though the new mode was for low ones; and knee-gartered breeches, although wide-bottom ones were now in style. Here and there was even a ruff to be seen.

Forever Amber, by Kathleen Winsor

A *crowd* would have told us nothing, would have created no picture in our mind. A few well-chosen details paint a whole picture and also reflect the way people actually take in large things—in small pieces.



■ **TIP 10: When you describe an object, be specific.**

Don't say a flower, say a rose or a lily or a daisy—as long as your viewpoint character would know what kind of flower it is (see Tip 13 on page 11). Not a boat, but a sailboat or a rowboat or a cabin cruiser or a canoe.

They went back to the little over-lived-in room in the Hotel Bolívar. The manager was reading *El Litoral* in the patio with his fly open for coolness. . . .

The Honorary Consul, by Graham Greene

Not just *The manager was reading a newspaper.*



Chapter 2

Technical Tips



Knowing What to Describe

Beginning writers frequently complain that they don't know which items around their characters to mention and which to leave out. Often, when they do mention something, it's in a way that's unrealistic in terms of the viewpoint character's perceptions. For example, a character walks into a room in which only a brief exchange with another character takes place—yet the author describes the room down to the minutest detail. This is unrealistic: in real life, a person in such a situation would get only a general impression of the room, so that's what you would give your reader. Viewpoint writing—writing that filters everything around the viewpoint character through his feelings and perceptions—can make your life much easier.

■ **TIP 11: Mention or describe only those people, places, and things of which your viewpoint character is aware and which are important to the story.**

They wandered deeper into the woods, Sister Hyacinthe adding various leaves and roots to her basket: scallions, borage, primrose and mints. Veering off to the right to avoid a marshy bog they came out on a clearing occupied, to Sister Hyacinthe's surprise, by a long aluminum house trailer. It fairly bristled with antennas and wires that ran toward a

post; one antenna resembled a glittering steel spider's web, the other, a clothesline. "My goodness," she said. "Who lives here?"

A Nun in the Closet, by Dorothy Gilman

Obviously there is far more to see in the woods than what Gilman has described. But she tells us only what's important to this part of the story: the various leaves and roots (notice that Gilman tells us their names, because Sister Hyacinthe knows their names, and we are in her viewpoint); the marshy bog; the house trailer; its antennas and wires.



■ **TIP 12: Describe people, places, and things in the vernacular of the viewpoint character—naturally, as if the character herself were doing the describing.**

This means that if your viewpoint character is James, you wouldn't write: *James's mother, Margery Strathmore, hurried into the room*, because James wouldn't think about his mother that way. You'd probably write: *His mother hurried into the room*, or perhaps, if you're deep in viewpoint: *Mom hurried into the room*.

They used to hang men at Four Turnings in the old days.

. . . I can remember as a little lad seeing a fellow hang in chains where the four roads met. . . .

It was winter, and some passing joker had placed a sprig of holly in the torn vest for celebration. Somehow, at seven years old, that seemed to me the final outrage, but I said nothing. Ambrose must have taken me there for a purpose, perhaps to test my nerve, to see if I would run away, or laugh, or cry. . . .

My Cousin Rachel, by Daphne du Maurier

It wouldn't be natural for Philip, the narrator, to say, "Ambrose, my guardian." In the next sentence, du Maurier conveys this information in a more natural way:

As my guardian, father, brother, counselor, as in fact my whole world, he was forever testing me.

Du Maurier has cleverly delivered important information—Philip's relationship to Ambrose—by making it part of a point Philip is making.



■ **TIP 13: If the viewpoint character wouldn't know the name of something, don't name it.**

Christ! And he was telling the truth, 'cause there was one of them right there, no jive, at the back of the hall, and it looked like a half-burnt suit of clothes lying there, kind of vaguely in the outline of a man, and sure thing, she could tell by the smell, there'd been a Dead guy in the clothes, and just the sleeves and the pant legs and shoes were left. . . .

The Queen of the Damned, by Anne Rice

Baby Jenks, through whose viewpoint this passage is written, isn't quite sure yet what it is she sees, so Rice simply describes it, letting us wonder along with her character.



■ **TIP 14: If the viewpoint character isn't aware of something, don't tell us about it in a section written from his or her viewpoint.**

Examples: phones ringing, knocks on the door, people watching. In amateurish manuscripts it's common to find the likes of: *They slept so soundly that they did not hear the desperate screams of the woman in the next apartment.* Remember, if the viewpoint character doesn't see it, hear it, taste it, feel it, or smell it, neither do we.



■ **TIP 15: Though it's desirable to make use of your characters' senses in your writing, it's rarely necessary to use the actual verbs of perception such as *saw, heard, and smelled.***

Ironically, these words distance the reader from your viewpoint character because they remind the reader that he is not actually living the story through the character.

Simply describe the perception. Note, in the following passage, how Bob Ottum shows us what the viewpoint character sees.

She walked back into the living room and picked up her skirt and her panty hose and shoes and then walked over to the window and looked down.

The Lincoln was down there again.

The Tuesday Blade, by Bob Ottum

Not: *She saw that the Lincoln was parked down there again.*

Section Specifics

In The Marshall Plan® novel writing system, a section is a unit of story in which a viewpoint character pursues a goal she thinks will take her closer to achieving the novel’s overall story goal, or in which a viewpoint character reacts to having failed to achieve the short-term goal.

■ **TIP 16: Don’t start your sections just anywhere; get us as quickly as possible into the section’s main action.**

Don’t take too long leading up to the meat of the section, or your readers will become bored. Give just enough setup so the reader knows which characters you’re writing about and where they are (see Anchoring the Reader on page 14), then dive into the action.

Three days later Kay Adams got out of a taxi in front of Corleone mall in Long Beach. She had phoned, she was expected. Tom Hagen met her at the door and she was disappointed that it was him. She knew he would tell her nothing.

In the living room he gave her a drink. She had seen a couple of other men lounging around the house but not Sonny. She asked Tom Hagen di-

rectly, “Do you know where Mike is? Do you know where I can get in touch with him?”

The Godfather, by Mario Puzo

A less skillful writer might have shown Kay making the phone call, then arriving. But these details are not important to the section. The section begins when Kay comes face to face with Tom Hagen. So Puzo starts the section with Key getting out of the taxi, then lets us know she’s phoned ahead.



Anchoring the Reader

Let your reader know right away which character you're writing about in a section. I call this anchoring the reader. It's irritating to have to read four paragraphs before you know which character you're reading about.

■ **TIP 17: Unless the section you're writing runs directly from the previous one with no visible break, state clearly in your section's first paragraph:**

- **who the section character is**
- **what time it is**
 - either relative to the previous section, if it was about the same character: twenty minutes later, that night, the following morning; or**
 - absolute: early Monday morning, at noon on the sixth of September, first thing Sunday**
- **location**

In the following passage, note how expertly Maeve Binchy quickly anchors Father Baily in *who*, *when*, and *where*.

Father Baily gritted his teeth when he saw the McMahons at Mass on Sunday. He was fast running out of words of consolation for the family.

There were just so many times a priest could explain about things being God's will to a bereaved family.

The Glass Lake, by Maeve Binchy



Conveying Emotion

■ **TIP 18: If anything important to your story has happened to your viewpoint character since his last section, bring the reader up-to-date at the beginning of the new section.**

At four o'clock the following afternoon Samuel Weinstock leaned back in his chair, feeling extremely pleased with himself. He had sold a painting, which brought him a couple of weeks of relatively guilt-free inactivity, and the evening with Micheline had left him giddily euphoric. It had worked out just as planned: a marvelous meal, wonderful stories about an antique fair at Brussels that Micheline had just attended, and, at the end of it, a long period of languorous, luxurious sex.

The Rembrandt Panel, by Oliver Banks



Updating the Reader

■ **TIP 19: To show a character experiencing an emotion, don't tell us about it; show the character's physical responses to the emotion.**

These responses may include speech.

“Goddamnit, you son of a bitch! I’ll kill you, damnit!” Jane brought her fists down sharply on the steering wheel, her screams ricocheting off the closed windows of her car. “How could you do it, you miserable bastard? How could you do that to your daughter? How could you do it?”

See Jane Run, by Joy Fielding

Nothing conveys emotion as strongly as its physical manifestations. Fielding shows Jane’s anger by showing her pounding the steering wheel, screaming, and cursing her husband.

Don’t say: *John was desolate* or *Ariadne was ecstatic*. That’s telling, not showing, and conveys little or nothing to your reader. Convey an emotion by *showing* how the character acts on it.



Working With Time

■ **TIP 20: When you need to show the passing of time, write in the summary writing mode.**

In this manner you can swiftly cover a period of hours, days, weeks, even years. A few well-chosen details turn the summary into an effective bridge between passages in the active writing mode. In the excerpt below, the author sums up a month in his character's life by means of one sentence in the summary writing mode.

He spent the entire month of May on an extended spring tour, visiting every district in the network, and although he was never satisfied that all were fully stretched, what he found there gave him a personal glow of achievement and private assurance that very little had been overlooked in the regions.

God Is an Englishman, by R.F. Delderfield



Chapter 3

Section Connectors

In The Marshall Plan® novel writing system, a connector is a device for connecting sections (a unit of action in which a viewpoint character seeks to achieve a short-term goal she thinks will lead her to the story goal, or in which a viewpoint character reacts to having failed to achieve a short-term goal). There are three types of connectors: space-break, run-together, and summary.



The Space-Break Connector

■ **TIP 21: Insert a space break (press Enter twice) between two sections when:**

A. The two sections feature different view-point characters:

Cassie sighed, and began to pour the coffee. It was going to be all right, she thought. It was going to be all right.

[space-break connector (a blank line)]

That night, H el ene went to bed on the fold-out couch in Cassie’s small living room. . . .

Destiny, by Sally Beauman

B. You want to show a passage of time and do not want to do so using summary writing (see Tip 20 on page 17):

Frank took the offered card. “I appreciate that, Bill.”

[space-break connector (a blank line)]

Two hours later Seth Frank lifted up his phone and nothing happened. No dial tone, no outside line. The phone company was called.

Absolute Power, by David Baldacci



The Run-Together Connector

■ **TIP 22: When you're connecting two sections of your novel that both feature the same view-point character, and neither a break nor any connecting text is necessary, just run the sections together.**

I'd be careful, I said. Besides, she's never that close to me.

Sometimes she is, he said.

I looked down. I'd forgotten about that. I could feel myself blushing. I won't use it on those nights, I said. [run-together connector (no text)]

On the fourth evening he gave me the hand lotion, in an unlabeled plastic bottle. . . .

The Handmaid's Tale, by Margaret Atwood



The Summary Connector

■ **TIP 23: Use a summary connector—a brief passage of relatively inconsequential action, in the summary writing mode—when you’re connecting two sections featuring the same viewpoint character, don’t need the drama of a space break, but need to explain what happens between the sections.**

In the following passage, the summary connector is in italics:

January said she didn’t know Vera and she didn’t play backgammon, and she finally convinced Ned that she would be perfectly safe taking a cab home.

She fell into bed at midnight and was so exhausted that she slept. She was still asleep when her phone service rang her at eight-thirty.

“Miss Wayne, I just came on duty and I notice you didn’t call in to get your messages last night.”

Once Is Not Enough, by Jacqueline Susann



Chapter 4

The Action Writing Mode

The Marshall Plan® uses five different “modes” of writing: action, summary, dialogue, feelings/thoughts, and background. I’ll present tips on each one in the next five chapters.

The action writing mode is the one used most in a commercial novel. It’s the mode in which you straightforwardly show the story action itself.



Ordering Events

■ **TIP 24: Present all events one at a time, rather than trying to show that they happen simultaneously.**

Writing so that one action happens after another makes for smoother, more natural, more professional-reading text. Even a complicated battle is rendered action-by-action by an accomplished novelist:

[Sam] sprang out to meet Shagrat with a shout. He was no longer holding the Ring, but it was there, a hidden power, a cowering menace to the slaves of Mordor; and in his hand was Sting, and its light smote the eyes of the orc like the glitter of cruel stars in the terrible elf-countries, the dream of which was a cold fear to all his kind. And Shagrat could not both fight and keep hold of his treasure. He stopped, growling, baring his fangs. Then once more, orc-fashion, he leapt aside, and as Sam sprang at him, using the heavy bundle as both shield and weapon, he thrust it hard into his enemy's face. Sam staggered, and before he could recover, Shagrat darted past and down the stairs.

The Return of the King, by J.R.R. Tolkien



Action/Result

■ **TIP 25: Present action in action-result order.**

She looks—and sees. He bites—and tastes. She asks—he answers. The arrow hits him—he cries out. No simultaneity here, either.

Sergeant Connolly pressed his button, and two windows were sundered from the wall by explosives. A fraction of a second later, three more windows were blown in by a wall of noise and blazing light. They flew across the room in a shower of glass and lead fragments, missing the children in the corner by three metres.

Rainbow Six, by Tom Clancy



Writing It All Out

■ **TIP 26: When you are in the action writing mode, don't accidentally slip into the summary writing mode. In the action writing mode, everything—even seemingly unimportant details—gets shown.**

Again, we drove down Pokfulum Road, and then turned left through the gay uproar of the Chinese shops in the Saiyingpun district, past the opera houses, and the slums, to emerge on the Praya. . . .

A Many Splendored Thing, by Han Suyin

Authenticity and a more vivid picture result from the author's naming Pokfulum Road, describing the "gay uproar of the Chinese shops in the Saiyingpun district," and mentioning the opera houses and the slums. The summary writing mode—*We drove around Hong Kong*—would not have achieved this effect.



Chapter 5

The Summary Writing Mode

In the summary writing mode, you report events in a condensed, synoptic form. You tell the reader rather than show him what's going on. The summary writing mode has numerous uses.



Connecting Sections

As we've already seen in Tip 23, the summary writing mode may be used to connect two sections.

In the following example, the summary-mode connector is in italics.

“Of course you must!” declared Charlotte to my mother in her jovial contralto, linking her arm through her husband’s. “Craven would like nothing better.” She gave us all a broad wink and led him away.

We left the cool, dark theater and went out into the bright, hot, late-afternoon sun of Broadway, passing more species of humanity than I had ever thought possible on the way to our parking garage.

“Was he an old friend of yours?” Mrs. Dibble asked my mother.

The Finishing School, by Gail Godwin



Reporting Events

■ **TIP 27: To report events whose details are unimportant, use the summary writing mode.**

In the following passage, the summary-mode writing is in italics.

. . . She crawled through the opening and toward the next row. Two more and they would be in the clear.

Despite the chill, she was beginning to sweat. *Anxiously she went to work on the second row. It was constructed of double strands and took almost twenty minutes to cut through. The last row was made up of triple strands, and it was forty minutes before she was finished.*

She lay on her back, gasping for breath, her arms and shoulders aching with pain.

The Pirate, by Harold Robbins

It's unnecessary to give us a blow-by-blow account of everything that happens in the summarized forty minutes, because the details don't matter. To do so would also have slowed down a passage meant to be fast-paced and suspenseful.



Telescoping Time

■ **TIP 28: To telescope time and speed up your story, write in the summary mode.**

When you telescope time, you present it in a condensed form. In the following passage, the summary-mode writing is in italics.

Doreen spent the morning in the woods looking for a place that was suitable to hide Pharaoh, if that precaution ever seemed necessary. She returned before noon and after unsaddling the horse was making her way toward the house when Flossie came out of the kitchen to meet her. Her eyes rolling tragically, the old woman gripped the younger one by both shoulders, seeming unable to speak until Doreen guessed her message.

“My brother has come home!”

“Yes’m!”

Look Away, Beulah Land, by Lonnie Coleman

The details of Doreen’s search for a hiding place for Pharaoh are unimportant. All we need to know is that she spend the morning searching. The summary writ-

ing mode was the right choice here, to telescope time but let us know what has transpired.



Spotlighting Emotion

■ **TIP 29: The summary writing mode can be an especially effective means of conveying a character's emotional state.**

When Seth left the Montoya party, he rode hard for an hour until he realized what he was doing to his horse. He stopped and rested. The first blind rage was gone, and the cool night air helped to clear his head of fury and liquor.

Gradually, he began to remember the way Morgan's face had lit up when she saw him, the way she had run to him. Damn that Montoya! Seth had played right into his hands, and Joaquín had enjoyed every moment of it.

The Enchanted Land, by Jude Deveraux

Deveraux doesn't give us the exact details of Seth's ride, but instead summarizes, at the same time conveying his rage by showing us how hard he rides his horse (see also Tip 19 on page 16).



Chapter 6

The Dialogue Writing Mode



Advance the Story

■ **TIP 30: Whenever possible, use dialogue to show conflict between characters, as in the following confrontation.**

Deep in worried thought, I descended the concrete ramp and swung the gate door open to reenter the tunnel.

Standing there waiting for me, breathing fire, was Fjbk.

“What have you done to her?” he rasped.

“Oh, swell,” I muttered.

“You must know about this! Tell me!”

I thought I had seen him looking crazy before, but at this moment he looked like a total maniac. . . .

Tiebreaker, by Jack M. Bickham

Bickham effectively uses dialogue to show us the confrontation between Brad, the novel’s lead, and Fjbk, with only a brief description of Fjbk’s appearance at the end of the passage.



■ **TIP 31: Keep dialogue tight and focused.**

. . . I did not realize the extent to which it had set him off until one day he came into my office.

“Hello, Robert,” I said. “Did you come to cheer me up?”

“Would you like to go to South America, Jack?” he asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I never wanted to go. Too expensive. You can see all the South Americans you want in Paris anyway.”

“They’re not real South Americans.”

“They look awfully real to me.”

The Sun Also Rises, by Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway, known for his economical style, does away with the inevitable chitchat that precedes most conversations in real life. He gets immediately to the meat of the discussion: whether or not Jake will accompany Robert to South America.

Tight, focused dialogue not only advances your story but also keeps it moving swiftly. Comb your dialogue for sometimes-unnecessary words like *yes*, *no*, *oh*, and *well*.



The Illusion of Realism

■ **TIP 32: Even as you keep your dialogue economical, strive to make it sound natural.**

Aretha Mae sensed something going on. She pulled her daughter to one side and said in a hoarse whisper, “You got money comin’. Real money.”

Cyndra was surprised. “I have?”

“Mr. Browning—he came through.”

“Why?” Cyndra asked suspiciously.

“Cause I told him he hadda do what’s right.”

“I thought you didn’t believe me.”

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. It don’t matter—he owes you.”

“How much money?” Cyndra asked quickly.

“We’ll talk about it next week,” Aretha Mae said.

“Why not now?”

“Now’s not the time.”

American Star, by Jackie Collins

Collins gets right to the point, but the conversation between Cyndra and her mother sounds completely natural because of Collins’s measured use of dialect, contractions, and omitted words, as well as short, quick statements and questions.



Differentiating Characters

■ **TIP 33: Create distinctive voices for your characters to help the reader keep track of who is speaking.**

. . . When the wagon drew level again she said, “Are you going along this road?”

“Ah.”

“How much will you charge me?”

“Two shilling.”

“Then may I get in?”

“Ah.”

Hester Roon, by Norah Lofts

It’s not difficult to tell when Hester, the novel’s lead, is speaking, and when the lower-class carter is speaking. Note that the skillful Lofts uses no dialogue tags at all in this exchange. We’ll discuss tags in the next tip.



Tackling Tags

■ TIP 34: Use a minimum of speaker tags, or attributions.

She turns back to him. “Did you hear about Jane Kendall?”

“Jane Kendall?” He frowns. “Who’s Jane Kendall?”

“That woman I told you about? From Gymporee?”

He looks vacant, and she realizes that she might not have ever mentioned Jane Kendall to him after all. For some reason, though, she’s still irritated when he shakes his head and says, “Never heard of her.”

“I definitely told you about her, Joel.”

Her insinuation hangs in the air between them. He never listens anymore when she talks to him. He doesn’t think anything she has to say is important.

“Maybe you did,” he says with a shrug. “What about her?”

“Where are you going?”

“Upstairs to change, as soon as you tell me about this Jane Kendall person.”

The Last to Know, by Wendy Corsi Staub

This passage contains only two actual attributions: *and says* and *he says*. Staub makes it clear who’s speaking, though, by dropping a gesture between lines of dialogue (*He frowns.*) and simply through the context of the dialogue itself. Note that simple speaking verbs such as *said*, *asked*, and *answered* are perfectly sufficient for most dialogue. The pros nearly always use these words or none at all.



Conversational Gestures

■ **TIP 35: Keep your characters' gestures during dialogue to a minimum.**

“Don't you think we ought to talk about it?”
she said the next morning at breakfast.

“About what?”

She looked at him; he seemed genuinely un-
knowing. “The conversations we've been mak-
ing,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“The way you haven't been looking at me.”

“What are you *talking* about? I've been look-
ing at you.”

“No you haven't.”

“I have so. Honey, what is it? What's the
matter?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“No, don't say that. What is it? What's both-
ering you?”

“Nothing.”

Rosemary's Baby, by Ira Levin

Levin, known for his simple, direct style, needs no ges-
tures—or “stage business,” as they call it in the
theater—to add impact to what poor Rosemary and her
husband, Guy, are saying. A less skillful writer might
have peppered this passage with frowns, innocent
looks, amazed stares, and pouts.



Breaking It Up

■ **TIP 36: Chop up your dialogue so that no character is allowed to go on too long—unless to do so would be realistic in the context of the conversation.**

Note how Jennie, a young girl, prattles on quite believably in the fourth paragraph of the following excerpt:

She gave my arm another squeeze, and made a wild swoop to the right. “Hooray,” she cried; “I’m going to have my picture painted.”

“Won’t Emily be mad?”

“Emily is my best friend,” she explained. “She had her picture painted by Mr. Fromkes, and I said you were going to do mine, and she said she’d never heard of you, and so I slapped her, and we quarreled.”

“Well,” I said. “But I thought it was Cecily you always fought with.”

She looked away suddenly, and I felt her hand tremble on my arm. “Cecily died,” she said in a

whisper. “She had scarlet fever. Now my best friend is Emily. I thought you’d know.”

Portrait of Jennie, by Robert Nathan

Keep up a quick volley of lines of dialogue between your characters. Some writers allow each character no more than three sentences at a time, but this rule isn’t always practical. You get the idea, though.



Paragraphing Tricks

■ **TIP 37: Press Enter—start a new paragraph—whenever someone new is speaking.**

Things had come to a head during the holidays. Something had occurred which had seriously upset the girl, but about this she remained silent.

“Have you tried to tell your mother how you feel about these things?”

“At first, Sir, but she never listened, so I didn’t bother any more.”

“Doesn’t your Nan know that your being late would upset your mother?”

“Sometimes Mum’s very late coming home, and Nan thinks I should not be in the house all by myself.”

“Well, Pamela, there seems to be no way in which I can help.”

“Wouldn’t you come and talk with Mum, Sir?”

“Would that help?”

“I think it might, Sir.”

To Sir, With Love, by E.R. Braithwaite

Paragraphing makes it perfectly clear who is speaking. Note Braithwaite’s judicious use of the occasional *Sir* and *Pamela* to keep things straight.



Conveying How It's Said

■ **TIP 38: Whenever possible, make the dialogue itself convey how it is spoken.**

Dame Bela took no notice of her. “How old are you?” she asked me.

“Sixteen,” I said, and she looked slowly all the length of me, from my bare feet to the very top of my head.

“It’s to be hoped,” she said, “that you’ve already done with growing.” The way she said it made me feel fiercely hungry.

“Can you comb and spin?” she said, and first I said, “Yes,” remembering my mother’s lies to the bailiff, and then I thought better of it and said, “No,” which made the girls laugh. “But I can learn,” I said. “I can learn very quickly.”

“That’s to be seen,” said the Dame. “Show me your hands.”

The Tall One, by Barbara Jefferis

In this passage Jefferis uses not a single adverb to convey how her dialogue is spoken, yet we have no

trouble hearing young Mary’s diffidence, Dame Bela’s haughtiness.

Overuse of adverbs is another hallmark of the amateur novelist. Try to make your dialogue convey its own description. Occasionally you will need to use words other than *said* or *asked* to create the effect you want—*whispered*, *shouted*, *cried*, and so on. Or you may need to add an adverb, in cases in which there would be no other way for the reader to know how words are spoken (“You’re a crafty devil,” she said admiringly). Just don’t overdo it.



Invisible Punctuation

■ **TIP 39: Keep punctuation in dialogue simple, so that it's virtually invisible to your readers.**

“What of this Welsh boy, your squire?”

“Morgan? He’s been with me since he could walk, he speaks no Welsh, he’s a Norman. When he’s knighted I’ll give him land and make him my vassal. The Welsh won’t have him back.”

“He’s a good boy, Morgan,” Roger said.

“Fifteen knights.” Robert frowned, thinking. “I’m trying to remember which of them hasn’t paid his fee yet.”

“I’ll pay them if I must. See if they will pay scutage.”

“Send Simon d’Ivry,” Roger said.

“Ah, no.” Fulk stood up. “Simon’s place, I feel, is with Thierry. If that’s all, I’m going to bed.”

“That’s all,” Robert said. “Will you be here this summer to hold court?”

“I don’t know. Maybe in the autumn. I’ll tell you.”

“What do you plan for Simon?” Roger said.

Fulk picked up a stump of candle on the table and lit it from a taper on the wall. “I’m not sure. God will guide me.”

The Earl, by Cecelia Holland

In this passage Holland uses no dashes, no ellipses, just simple periods and commas. Remember that in fiction, sentence fragments are perfectly acceptable (*Maybe in the autumn.*) and in fact are often necessary to convey natural-sounding speech.



The Summary Writing Mode in Dialogue: When the Words Themselves Don't Matter

■ **TIP 40: Use the summary writing mode to convey dialogue whose exact words are unimportant.**

In the following excerpt, the passage in italics illustrates this tip.

“It seems most efficient for you to stay,” Grimani said at last. “But be good enough not to drag this enquiry into irrelevancies. All right, Maestro, let’s begin.”

Donati patiently recounted how Lodovico had persuaded him to come to his villa on the Lake of Como and train a young English tenor whose identity was shrouded in mystery. . . .

The Devil in Music, by Kate Ross

Here is another example from the same novel:

“What exactly do you mean to do?”

Julian explained his plan to explore the villa and its environs, and to question all who had been at odds with Lodovico Malvezzi before his death, or had benefited from it. . . .

In the two passages above, the exact details of what Donati and Julian are saying do not matter, and would only have held up the story.



■ **TIP 41: Use the summary writing mode when a character is saying something the reader already knows.**

That cheered me up, so I went on with the rest of the stuff, about going to work and Lucy Nye dying and leaving me a house, and me getting a job in Bristol. Then I said I’d used all my money and taken work in London. Then I

moved to Rutlands and met Mark and we got married. It all sounded so straightforward that I believed it myself.

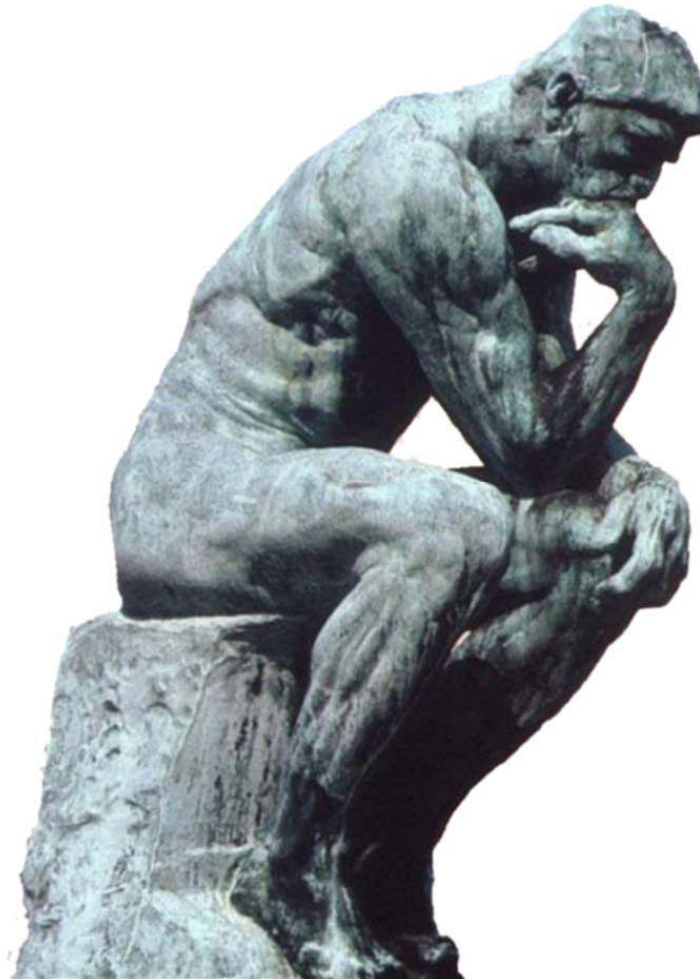
Marnie, by Winston Graham

We already know about Marnie's fabrication and don't need to hear her deliver it again. The summary writing mode is enough here.



Chapter 7

The Feelings/Thoughts Writing Mode



Conveying What's Thought or Felt

■ **TIP 42: To convey a character's thoughts, use the indirect method whenever possible.**

The indirect method conveys the thought without using the thinker's exact inner words. You rarely need *he thought* or *he wondered*. The excerpt below contains examples of both indirect (in italics) and direct (in bold italics) thought used together.

He was silent, but he didn't apologize. *Didn't she know he was guiding her to safety because she was Kusak's daughter? Not because she had once been the wife of Jiri Hrádek. She had seen through that son of a bitch eventually; perhaps she had never known how important he was in the security police. **She's had troubles enough***, he decided. *And once, long ago, she had been his friend. . . .*

The Snare of the Hunter, by Helen MacInnes



In the following excerpt, only direct thought (in italics) is used.

Jesus, he thought. How could anything that made you feel so good when you snorted it put you through this much hell when you didn't have it? Billy Joe's insides ached as if every organ scraped against the other. . . .

The Covenant of the Flame, by David Morrell



■ **TIP 43: Use the direct method to convey a character's thoughts when you feel that the exact inner words of the thought will have greater impact.**

Chapter 8

The Background Writing Mode

Every novel must include some explanatory background passages. The trouble with background is that it stops the forward flow of your story—something you want to avoid. So you find clever ways of working background information into your story so that your reader is barely aware it's there.



Background as Explanation

■ **TIP 44: Provide background information when it is needed to understand the story at this moment.**

In the following excerpt, the background information is in italics. Grace Metalious delivers background as explanation of the way Selena and Allison spend every Saturday, because the pattern is about to change.

Selena always stayed to supper on Saturdays, when Constance usually made something simple, like waffles or scrambled eggs with little sausages. To Selena, these were foods of unheard of luxury, just as everything about the MacKenzie home seemed luxurious—and beautiful, something to dream about. She loved the combination of rock maple and flowered chintz in the MacKenzie living room, and she often wondered, sometimes angrily, what in the world ailed Allison that she could be unhappy in surroundings like these, with a wonderful blonde mother, and a pink and white bedroom of her own.

This was the way the two friends had always spent their Saturday afternoons, but today some restlessness, some urge to contrariness, made Al-

lison hesitate to answer Selena’s, “What’ll we do today?” with the stock answer.

Peyton Place, by Grace Metalious

It’s necessary for us to know how Allison and Selena have always spent their time together, to understand the full significance of a change in the routine.



■ **TIP 45: Pare down background information so that the reader gets only what’s absolutely necessary for the story to make sense.**

In the following passage, background is delivered in the form of dialogue. Note how Signor Antonelli’s explanation is limited to the essential facts.

“What’s that?” Beatrice inquired.

“The Malleus Maleficarum means ‘The Witches’ Hammer,’” Signor Antonelli said. “It is a tract published in Germany in 1945, written by two fanatics, Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Krämer. It is important because it elevated witchcraft to the level of heresy, branding it once and for all as the work of the devil rather than the

misguided acts of a few disturbed human beings. It offers strict guidelines for ferreting out witches and for conducting the trials of the accused.”

John O’Connell was nodding in acknowledgment.

“I’ve never heard of it,” Beatrice said.

The Witches’ Hammer, by Jane Stanton Hitchcock

Very often, accomplished novelists find ways of presenting background information through dialogue, a livelier vehicle than straight narrative.



Withholding Background

■ **TIP 46: Look for ways to withhold background information in order to create a question that pulls your reader forward.**

The couple shown in the following passage from Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* have suffered the loss of their son, but up to this point in the novel we do not know about this tragedy. Listening to this conversation, we sense that something terrible has happened, but we don't yet know what it is. Our desire to know, fueled by Guest's skillful withholding of this information, keeps us turning the pages.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to blame ourselves for what happened, Cal."

"Fine," he says curtly. "Don't, then. If that means a damn thing."

Her head sinks lower. She busies herself, buttering the piece of bread in her hand.

"Beth," he says. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm sorry."

She looks up. "What's the matter?" she whispers. "Is something the matter?"

"No! Nothing's the matter."

"Then, why can't we go?" She leans toward him. "You know how good it feels to get away. All the wonderful places we've been, Spain, Portugal, Hawaii—I know it's a lot to ask, Cal, I know we have expenses—"

"It's not the money."

"—but I need it! I need to go! I need you to go with me."

"I want to go with you," he says. "We can go in the spring, maybe, any place you want."

She sits back, then, hands in her lap. "No." Her voice is flat. "If we don't go now, we won't go in the spring, either."

"That's silly," he says. "We will. I just think that now we should—this time we might try handling things differently."

"This time?"

He is upsetting her; upsetting himself, too. And he shouldn't drink at lunch, shouldn't have had two martinis, he is keyed up, now; nervous. This afternoon he will sit at his desk in a half-

stupor, surrounded by a confusion of papers.

“Then, are we going to live like this? With it always hanging over our heads?”

Ordinary People, by Judith Guest

Earlier in the novel, we have seen this same tragedy’s effects on the couple’s surviving son, Conrad.



■ **TIP 47: Whenever possible, cut up background information and feed it to your reader in small pieces.**

Not only does this method make the background information less intrusive to the forward flow of your story, but it also helps build suspense. Your reader wants to know the rest of this backstory.

In the following passage, the author gives us the first of a number of incidents, which took place before the story begins, that together convey the full extent of Mopsa’s madness.

Once, when Benet was about fourteen, they had been in a train together, alone in the carriage, and Mopsa had tried to stab her with a carving knife. Threatened her with it, rather. Benet had been wondering why her mother had

brought such a large handbag with her, a red one that didn’t go with the clothes she was wearing. Mopsa had shouted and laughed and said wild things and then she had put the knife back in her bag. But Benet had been very frightened by then. She lost her head and pulled the emergency handle, which Mopsa called the “communication cord.” The train stopped and there had been trouble for everyone involved, and her father had been angry and grimly sad.

She had more or less forgotten it. The memory of it came back quite vividly while she was waiting for Mopsa at Heathrow. . . .

The Tree of Hands, by Ruth Rendell

The above passage is actually the beginning of Rendell’s novel; she has used this bizarre piece of background as her story’s hook. It raises questions in the reader’s mind, questions that the reader must read further to find answers to.



Disguising Background

■ **TIP 48: Whenever possible, convert background into the action, dialogue, or feelings/thoughts mode.**

. . . “Oh, Eleanor, what is all this? Why did you send for me so secretly? And it’s been so long . . .”

He took her hand and brushed it with his lips as he realized that, after so long a separation, they had hardly greeted one another, that her first words to him had been a warning of danger. “What has happened?” he asked again.

“So many things,” she said heavily. “Terrible things, Richard. Perhaps it was wrong of me to send for you . . . but I couldn’t bear for you to hear it all from the lips of a casual gossip. And I’ve been virtually a prisoner ever since . . . ever since . . .” Her voice broke and Richard reached out a comforting arm which she ignored. “Sit down, dear heart, and I’ll try to tell you everything. You would do well to drink some wine . . . pour for me, too. Richard, the first thing is . . . my father is dead. He died six weeks or more ago, in Compostella.”

Eleanor the Queen, by Norah Lofts

Lofts has used dialogue to incorporate important background information into this scene at the beginning of her novel, lacing it with clues about a past relationship between Eleanor and Richard. The combination makes the background more palatable and draws the reader along.



Flashbacks in a Flash

■ **TIP 49: Use a flashback when the exact details of a background incident are important enough that the incident must be presented blow-by-blow.**

In the following passage, the flashback—a passage of dialogue from Ambrose—is in italics.

He reckoned without his health, though, and when school and university lay behind me it was then his turn to go.

“They tell me if I spend another winter being rained on every day I shall end my days crippled in a Bath chair,” he said to me. “I must go off and search for the sun. The shores of Spain or Egypt, anywhere on the Mediterranean where it is dry and warm. I don’t particularly want to go, but on the other hand I’m damned if I’ll end my life a cripple. There is one advantage in the plan. I shall bring back plants that nobody else has got. We’ll see how the demons thrive in Cornish soil.”

My Cousin Rachel, by Daphne du Maurier

Here it is important to the author for us to hear Ambrose’s exact words during this episode that takes place before the novel’s start.

Be sparing with flashbacks, avoiding them when at all possible. They so successfully stop a novel’s forward progress that some editors forbid their authors to use them. Here, you’ll notice that du Maurier kept the flashback brief.



Chapter 9

Writing Dramatically

When a passage in a novel gives you that wonderful frisson that only beautifully written fiction can give you, it's because the novelist has utilized any of a number of tricks that add drama and emotional impact to the text. Here are some of those tricks for you to use in your own writing.



Word-Placement Savvy

■ **TIP 50: Remember that the end of a sentence carries the most emphasis.**

“Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.”

Rebecca, by Daphne du Maurier

The word *again* is at the end of the sentence because du Maurier wanted to stress the idea of Rebecca dreaming that she had gone back to that place of such tragedy. Would this sentence be as powerful if du Maurier had written *I dreamt I went to Manderley again last night?*

Savvy novelists often like to add a touch of drama at certain points in their novels, particularly at the places where readers typically pick books up and put them down (act closers), by creating a sentence whose most dramatic word or words come at the end.

Where can you make use of this technique most effectively?

The first sentence of your book:

Call me Ishmael.

Moby Dick, by Herman Melville

The first sentence of a section:

In the bright Sunday-morning sunlight, on the dirt road leading to the famous Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a huge white horse cantered slowly.

Omerta, by Mario Puzo

The last sentence of a section:

“What are you doing, Sandy?” said Miss Brodie.

“Only playing,” said Sandy, photographing this new Miss Brodie with her little eyes.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, by Muriel Spark

The first sentence of a chapter:

Joanne stares around the room at the small collection of mourners.

The Deep End, by Joy Fielding

The last sentence of a chapter:

I rolled over and looked at Jonathan. Jonathan looked at me. I got out of the bed and went

into the bathroom and fixed up. I am not completely mad.

Diary of a Mad Housewife, by Sue Kaufman

The last sentence of a novel:

It was a far cry from Kensington, a far cry.

A Far Cry From Kensington, by Muriel Spark



When to Break the Action/Result Rule

■ **TIP 51: To show a character's reaction to something shocking, break the action/result rule and show the reaction before describing what is being reacted to.**

Got that? Let's back up a little. In good fiction writing, actions create results. A character speaks; another character responds. A bullet hits a character; the character screams. A character looks out a window; the character sees what's out that window.

Now that you know the rule, I'm going to tell you one instance in which it's okay to break it: when a character suddenly discovers something heartstoppingly shocking. In this case, you'll create a more dramatic effect if you have your character react first, and then describe what it is he has seen. This technique works for a couple of reasons. First, a tiny moment of suspense is created between the horrified reaction and the description of what's being seen; the reader's eyes open wider and move quickly onward to learn what's there. Second, a truly awful spectacle will most likely require a good amount of description. If you describe the spectacle at length, then show your character's reaction, there's the danger of creating an odd, delayed-reaction effect that is not desirable.

... Across from her the door that led to Hydrotherapies was just closing. Its latch clicked

softly and she saw the knob released from the other side by an unseen hand. She opened her mouth to call out but as she stepped forward the beam of her flashlight dropped and she gasped in horror.

Marcel lay in the pale green tub, his eyes turned vacantly to the ceiling. Blood spattered the sides of the tub and ran in zigzag lines across his white jacket. His throat had been cut from ear to ear.

A Palm for Mrs. Pollifax, by Dorothy Gilman



Cliffhangers

■ TIP 52: Keep your readers flipping pages by using cliffhangers.

The smartest novelists use this old trick of keeping readers hanging at the end of a passage, forcing them to read on to learn what happens. A cliffhanger is any device that leaves the reader wanting to know more; for example, a character about to embark on a dangerous mission, a line of provocative dialogue, or a door beginning to swing open in a darkened room. Use this technique in any of the following places in your novel.

At the end of a section:

She thought about Nick in New York about to get his big chance. She wasn't planning on playing the little sister role, dragging along behind. She had every intention of making it just as big as he.

“Mr. Lee—”

“Call me Marik.”

“Marik. Tell me the truth—do Reno Records and I have a future together, or am I wasting my time.”

American Star, by Jackie Collins

At the end of a chapter:

“I do sympathize with you,” Chips said.

“I hoped you would. And that brings me to what I came here to ask you. Briefly, my suggestion is that—if you felt equal to it and would care to—how about coming back here for a while? You look pretty fit, and, of course, you know all the ropes. I don't mean a lot of hard work for you—you needn't take anything strenuously—just a few odd jobs here and there, as you choose. What I'd like you for more than anything else is not for the actual work you'd do—though that, naturally, would be very valuable—but for your help in other ways—in just belonging here. There's nobody ever been more popular than you were, and are still—you'd help to hold things together if there were any danger of them flying to bits. And perhaps there is that danger. . . .”

Chips answered, breathlessly and with a holy joy in his heart: “I'll come. . . .”

Good-Bye, Mr. Chips, by James Hilton



The Tips

1. Provide the most comprehensive description of a character at the time that character is first introduced.
2. Describe a character when his appearance at this particular stage of your story is important.
3. Describe a character when her appearance has changed in a significant way.
4. Don't describe what doesn't need describing, as in the case of places we've all been or places we've all seen.
5. Do describe a place your viewpoint character has never been (unless it's a place we've all been or seen; see Tip 4 above).
6. Describe a place if it has changed in an important way.
7. Whenever possible, work your setting description into your character's actions.
8. As with describing places, tell us how something looks only if it's something we haven't seen before or if it's something whose appearance we would have no way of knowing.
9. If you're describing something that is actually made up of a number of separate elements (a crowd, a flower garden, a city street), name the object first, then focus on a telling detail or two.
10. When you describe an object, be specific.
11. Mention or describe only those people, places, and things of which your viewpoint character is aware and which are important to the story.
12. Describe people, places, and things in the vernacular of the viewpoint character—naturally, as if the character herself were doing the describing.
13. If the viewpoint character wouldn't know the name of something, don't name it.
14. If the viewpoint character isn't aware of something, don't tell us about it in a section written from his or her viewpoint.
15. Though it's desirable to make use of your characters' senses in your writing, it's rarely necessary to use the actual verbs of perception such as *saw*, *heard*, and *smelled*.
16. Don't start your sections just anywhere; get us as quickly as possible into the section's main action.
17. Unless the section you're writing runs directly from the previous one with no visible break, state clearly in your section's first paragraph: who the section character is; what time it is (either relative to the previous section, if it was about the same character: twenty minutes later,

that night, the following morning; or absolute: early Monday morning, at noon on the sixth of September, first thing Sunday); location.

18. If anything important to your story has happened to your viewpoint character since his last section, bring the reader up-to-date at the beginning of the new section.
19. To show a character experiencing an emotion, don't tell us about it; show the character's physical responses to the emotion.
20. When you need to show the passing of time, write in the summary writing mode.
21. Insert a space break (press Enter twice) between two sections when (a) the two sections feature different viewpoint characters; (b) you want to show a passage of time and do not want to do so using summary writing.
22. When you're connecting two sections of your novel that both feature the same viewpoint character, and neither a break nor any connecting text is necessary, just run the sections together.
23. Use a summary connector—a brief passage of relatively inconsequential action, in the summary writing mode—when you're connecting two sections featuring the same viewpoint character, don't need the drama of a space break, but need to explain what happens between the sections.
24. Present all events one at a time, rather than trying to show that they happen simultaneously.
25. Present action in action-result order.
26. When you are in the action writing mode, don't accidentally slip into the summary writing mode. In the action writing mode, everything—even seemingly unimportant details—gets shown.
27. To report events whose details are unimportant, use the summary writing mode.
28. To telescope time and speed up your story, write in the summary mode.
29. The summary writing mode can be an especially effective means of conveying a character's emotional state.
30. Whenever possible, use dialogue to show conflict between characters.
31. Keep dialogue tight and focused.
32. Even as you keep your dialogue economical, strive to make it sound natural.
33. Create distinctive voices for your characters to help the reader keep track of who is speaking.
34. Use a minimum of speaker tags, or attributions.
35. Keep your characters' gestures during dialogue to a minimum.
36. Chop up your dialogue so that no character is allowed

to go on too long—unless to do so would be realistic in the context of the conversation.

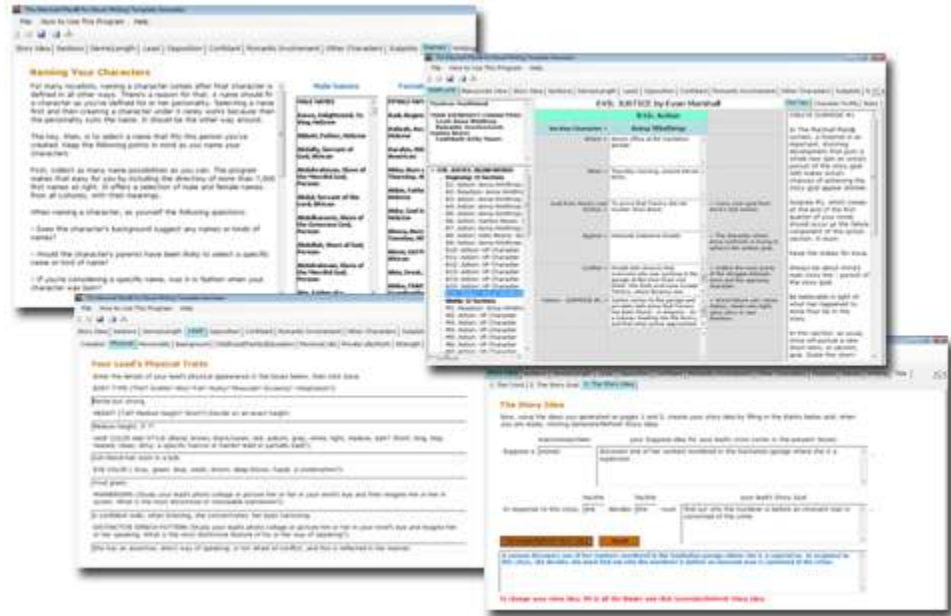
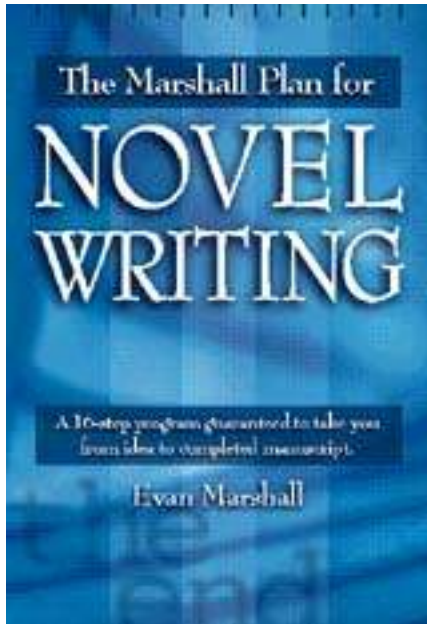
37. Press Enter—start a new paragraph—whenever someone new is speaking.
38. Whenever possible, make the dialogue itself convey how it is spoken.
39. Keep punctuation in dialogue simple, so that it's virtually invisible to your readers.
40. Use the summary writing mode to convey dialogue whose exact words are unimportant.
41. Use the summary writing mode when a character is saying something the reader already knows.
42. To convey a character's thoughts, use the indirect method whenever possible.
43. Use the direct method to convey a character's thoughts when you feel that the exact inner words of the thought will have greater impact.
44. Provide background information when it is needed to understand the story at this moment.
45. Pare down background information so that the reader gets only what's absolutely necessary for the story to make sense.
46. Look for ways to withhold background information in

order to create a question that pulls your reader forward.

47. Whenever possible, cut up background information and feed it to your reader in small pieces.
48. Whenever possible, convert background into the action, dialogue, or feelings/thoughts writing mode.
49. Use a flashback when the exact details of a background incident are important enough that the incident must be presented blow-by-blow.
50. Remember that the end of a sentence carries the most emphasis.
51. To show a character's reaction to something shocking, break the action/result rule and show the reaction before describing what is being reacted to.
52. Keep your readers flipping the pages by using cliffhangers.

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