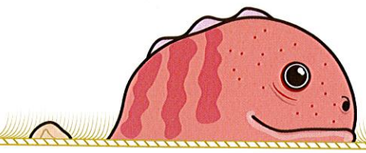
to come alive in your mind before you start writing. Thoughtfully considering what you write is an essential part of the process.

- Be open to including autobiographical elements in fantasy—it will often salvage what might otherwise be inert on the page.
- Be fiercely protective of your imagination, and nurture it.

Still, there are limits, and not all minds are built for the kind of creativity that fiction requires, in part because the point of the imagination at times is to fabricate, to in a sense *lie*, and by lying make the lie—that which does not exist—the truth.

Kali Wallace tells the story of having had a very smart friend in college, a neurology researcher who writes nonfiction, who claimed "with absolute certainty to have no imagination." Wallace recalls that "we had a great many conversations in which both of us would be utterly baffled and bemused by how the other person's brain works. She wanted to learn how to tease out imaginative thoughts from her brain, but I had absolutely no idea how to help her do that. Making things up comes so naturally to me I didn't even really understand how the world looked from her point of view."



Your fiction is part of a complex ecosystem, and within that ecosystem, it is an organism with many complex parts. Understanding the Elements of Narrative, including the Greater and Lesser Mysteries, should be in the service of also understanding how they work together. Once you have even a little mastery of these elements, that monstrous penguin you just created that walks on water and belches fire will have three eyes by design rather than by accident. It also might just find a reader or two . . . .

The imagination is infinite—it can encompass all you want it to encompass, if you let it. Everything we see around us, whether functional or decorative, once existed in someone's imagination. Every building, every fixture, every chair, every table, every vase, every road, every toaster. In fact, the world we live in is largely a manifestation of many individual and collective imaginations applied to the task of altering preexisting reality. So the question becomes, *How can you position yourself to dream well?*

Chapter 2: The Ecosystem of Story

Descartes was wrong: The world is more like a living creature than a machine—and so, too, are stories. In our context, in fact, stories are animals that would be the pride of any medieval bestiary. Like living creatures, stories come in a bewildering number of adaptations and mutations. Even within the constraint of written words, incredible variety occurs due to the near-infinite number of possible combinations. Anyone who tells you there are only a dozen types of stories should be viewed with as much suspicion as someone who tells you "all animals are the same." A penguin is not a hamster; nor is a prawn a sea cucumber, an elephant a squid, an anteater a dragon.

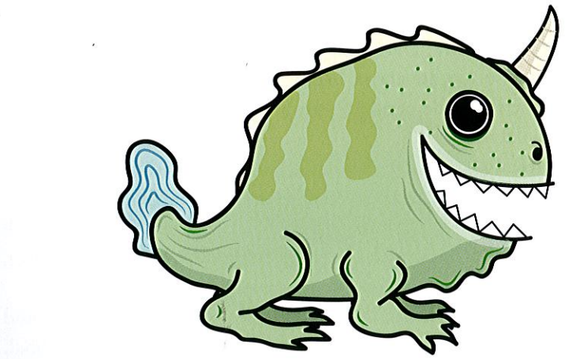
Still, each of these story-creatures conforms to certain unities of shape, habit, and function. Stories eat, drink, sneeze, run around, and hunt for food like any animal. They experience life through five or more senses. They often have a head, a torso, and, hopefully, a tail—or, if you must, a beginning, middle, and end. They have a particular style, depending on the texture of their prose-skin. Their musculature, bones, and internal organs, while not visible to the reader's eye, work together in perfect union to create movement, thought, action, reaction, and any number of other functions. And, like some animals, a great story watches the reader through some uncanny animating impulse that goes beyond any blueprint or technical precision on the page.

Just as the elements of a story or novel can be viewed as the parts of a fantastical creature, so, too, can stories be viewed as part of a complex, codependent ecosystem of

narrative—perhaps even a little bit like Robert Connett's vision for "Night Trawler," reproduced in this chapter. Fiction ranges from megafauna—like novels—all the way down to practically microscopic life forms like flash fiction. The different sizes of these life forms in no way reflects the quality or importance of each; a good short story, lithe and swift and intelligent, can be more intricate and more involving than the most sprawling novel that clomps through the underbrush or pushes leviathan-like through the sea. From the reader's point of view, the best examples all share that *frisson* of discovery and mystery, some sense of life beyond the page. If you were to disappear into that landscape, you'd find yourself not backstage looking at ladders and props, but in *another world*.

To grow as a fiction writer, you absolutely must engage in some dissection of stories, your own and the work of others. But you also have to be a kind of *zoologist* or *naturalist* of narrative. Observations of a living organism require a different approach, one that doesn't so much catalogue separate parts as seek to understand how everything works together. (It's also worth noting that no amount of searching through entrails will ever replicate or truly explicate the actual experience of reading a good story or novel.)

The paradox is that, by its very nature, any writing book must at least begin by addressing many of those elements in isolation and often be definitional in nature, artificially freezing in place what exists in a larger, shifting context. The purpose is to establish the basic foundation for the exploration found in the later chapters. There you will discover these elements set into motion or working in complex ways, and be reminded once again that the metaphor of stories being *alive* is both powerful and useful.



NOVEL

NOVELLA

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORY

FLASH FICTION

POEM

Narrative Life Forms

Novel: The megafauna of the literary world, the novel ranges from about 55,000 words to 250,000 words, although some are larger. In a few painful cases, publishers have insisted on long novels being broken into two or more shorter novels. This can result in permanent skeletal and muscular damage. Other novels may be "padded" by the author, resulting in unnecessary scenes and sections; this negatively affects the novel across its circulatory, respiratory, and organ systems. A novel allows for digressions that may seem like tangents but support theme or characterization in interesting ways. Novels can also entertain the idea of, for example, entire chapters on whaling practices (*Moby Dick*) or using many viewpoint characters. These options don't just lengthen the text but widen and deepen narrative in ways different from the short story and the novella. The novel shown in this panel is "in progress," with some parts of the structure not yet in place; nor is every passenger-character on board.

Novella: Perhaps the purest form of life in the literary world, the novella ranges from about 11,000 words to 55,000 words (some call the length from 11,000 to 17,000 a "novelette"). The novella combines attributes of the novel and the short story. The best novellas allow for ample expansion of character arcs, with room for extended exploration of theme and situation—with less chance of extraneous scenes. A novella can entertain more viewpoint characters but often keeps its main focus on one person. Like the short story, the novella depends on a certain precision of language. Here, you can see a rare night-time shot of a novella in motion, as it is being read, accompanied by a few nocturnal flash fictions.

Short Story: Combining dexterity and depth, the short story ranges in length from about 1,500 words to 10,000 words; anything shorter is likely to be labeled "flash fiction." Contrary to popular belief, the short story can be just as profound as any novel, the compression of idea, characterization, and structure all working to create a memorable experience for the reader. The best stories can travel a century or more and come back to the present, all within the span of a single paragraph or page. Stories rarely feature more than two viewpoint characters, and usually just one. This focus can make the short story seem more personal, as can the need for every sentence to count; in a skillful short story, no detail is without some purpose beyond the decorative. The short story pictured here has already found an eager reader, who is so devoted to the story that he won't let go of it. ❧

The Night Trawlers, Version 2, by R. S. Conner (2009)

The Elements

What are the main elements of narrative? Because they can be identified as separate and present in the typical story, seven components qualify—even if the ways they interact with one another are myriad and thus unpredictable. These elements are the cells, the blood, the organs necessary for story life.

Characterization. The methods by which the primary and secondary people (or aliens or talking animals or raging monsters) in a story are made to seem real or interesting. These methods include the choice of point of view, use of exposition, and all of the other elements of story. Chapter 5 examines characterization in detail.

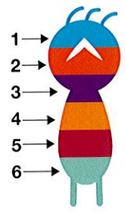
Point of View. The use of first person ("I"), second person ("you"), third person ("she"), limited omniscient, or omniscient approaches to portray the main characters and possibly minor characters as well.

Setting. The physical environments in which the story takes place. Chapter 6 explores setting, or "worldbuilding" in detail.

Events/Situations. What actually happens in the story, sometimes known as *plot* when describing a *sequence* of events—and often expressed through *scenes*. Events and situations are given significance and emphasis through *structure*. The organization of fiction is covered in detail by Chapter 4.

Dialogue. The conversations and snippets of speech that convey what the characters are saying to one another and that help to dramatize scenes. Indeed, use of dialogue often distinguishes a scene from summary (pure exposition).

Description. The details that "set the scene" and, in conjunction with dialogue, make a scene seem real and in-the-moment. Description can also be said to create a tone. A subset of description, exposition, is used for a specific purpose. It relates needed information by telling it directly to the reader rather than showing (or dramatizing) it. Read Kim Stanley Robinson's essay on Exposition later in this chapter.



Style. This slippery term more or less means the way the story is told; i.e., the patterns of words, phrases, and sentences through which the writer achieves certain effects. Some writers would group it with the Greater and Lesser Mysteries described later in this chapter.

A Closer Look at Some of the Elements

Those elements that commonly form the inspiration for story—narrative design (events/plot/structure), characterization, and worldbuilding (setting)—are explored in subsequent chapters. Here, let's take a closer look at elements found in most stories but that can be considered "layers" or "things deployed in the text": point of view, dialogue, description, and style.

Point of View

Who tells your story and how close you get to their perspective depends in part on **point of view**. In some stories, the reader may feel as if they're perched on the character's shoulder, or inside that person's head. In others, the reader feels more remote. That distance, or lack of distance, is key to other elements of the story, including the style and what details you convey.

Much of the information in this section is adapted from writer Nick Mamatas' very useful lecture on point of view.

In ***First Person,*** "I" is the narrator. First person sounds natural—we all function as first-person narrators every day—and is an easy way to give the reader access to the narrator's thoughts. If the narrator is not the main character, however, it is also an easy way to obscure the main character's thoughts. As critically acclaimed writer Nick Mamatas points out, "Using Dr. Watson as the narrator of the Sherlock Holmes stories allows Arthur Conan Doyle to keep some distance from his famous detective." For this reason, too, every first-person narrator is unreliable to a degree, a fact that you can use to your advantage in creating suspense or surprise.

First person can be very complex: "Remember that we all create narratives about other people," Mamatas says. "When Nick Carraway describes the Gatsby's death in forensic detail—'He stopped at the garage for a pneumatic mattress that had amused his guests during the summer, and the chauffeur helped him pump it up.'—he's not a witness. He pieced it together from talking to the chauffeur, the butler, and the gardener. But he describes it as fact, because that's just something Nick would do, given his obsession with Gatsby. The only true limit of a first-person narrator is determined by the character's personality." Just take care to know the difference between when a first-person narrator is conveying something interesting and when they're rambling.

In ***Second Person***, "You" is the narrator. Essentially, the reader is in the brain of the narrator, experiencing life as that person does. Second-person narration may be rarely used, but it can provide immediacy and a sense of seeing things more intensely. However, as Mamatas notes, "Many readers also reject being told who they are. When reading a sentence like 'You are a child soldier, AK-47 in hand. You are standing over the corpse of your mother;' some readers react by thinking, *No, I am not!*" The best second-person stories also give the reader a little room to ease into the narration. Mamatas cites the example of *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, which begins, "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning." By telling us who we are not, "the author has the chance to win us over by describing a debauched evening and early morning in a nightclub."

Third Person takes two main forms: omniscient and limited, but with subjective and objective forms of each. In *omniscient third-person* stories, the narrator is a godlike

Matthew Cheney on "Who Speaks"

voice with perfect knowledge of the characters and setting. Thus, there can be no real secrets kept, without the reader feeling cheated. Omniscient narrators, though they know everything, tend to be a bit distant from their characters. On the plus side, an omniscient narrator's knowledge is not limited to the characters. As Mamatas says, "Asides about the inner workings of submarines, the fate of the unborn children of characters, etc., are all acceptable, but can be tricky for an author to pull off—will readers remain interested throughout the course of the lecture? Also, omniscient narrators are often subjective narrators, and readers sometimes confuse their opinions with those of the author. So make sure your own opinions are sophisticated ones . . . "

In *limited third person*, the narration follows a single individual. What the writer can describe is limited by what the individual character perceives or experiences. This is the most common narrative choice in commercial fiction. But because the technique is heavily influenced by film and television, it can be problematic. "Often, writers and readers talk of a character being 'off-screen' instead of 'off-page,'" Mamatas says. "Or of a protagonist being followed around 'by a camera' instead of by an observer who makes choices about what to detail and what to edit out. But the camera metaphor can be misleading, as there is more to limited points of view than what the camera sees, and the camera can also be used in ways which violate the idea of limited point of view."

Many times, too, a point of view will choose *you* in a sense. You will sit down to write a rough draft, and you'll just *know* what character to follow and whether you want to use first, second, or third person. When Haruki Murakami attempted third person early in his career, he felt "embarrassed," as he explained in an interview with Hideo Furukawa. "I couldn't get past the feeling that writing in the third person was like playing God—you're on top, your characters way below" while first person "just felt so natural."

Veniss Underground VERSIONS

But if you get stuck or the finished piece just doesn't quite work, experimenting with a change in point of view can help rejuvenate the story and present you with new possibilities. Once, for my novel *Veniss Underground*, I couldn't figure out how to write about a character. I tried first and third person. Only when I settled on second person did the character come to life.

Dialogue

Speech in fiction may feel casual or "unstaged" from the reader's point of view, but regardless of this effect, the purpose of dialogue is focused and specific. In addition to being the primary impetus for why a scene feels in-the-moment and "like" real life—providing a sense of immediacy—dialogue in a scene can perform one or more of the following functions:

- Convey a mood
- Reveal character traits or motivation
- Provide information
- Move the plot forward and/or increase its pace
- Create or reflect conflict, tension, or understanding between characters
- Foreshadow what is to come

Point of View: "Subjective Versus Objective" and "Roving" by Nick Mamatas

Nick Mamatas is the author of several novels, including Bullettime, *which involves three separate first-person points of view (from the same person in different universes!) plus a third-person present, and* Sensation *(a first-person plural POV via the sensory organs of a collectively intelligent species of spider). His other books and stories are as weird.*

Point of view is itself a matter of fashion and sensibility—that is, point of view and how it works in fiction depends partially on your point of view. Ideas about point of view have changed during the life span of the novel. Limited third-person and first-person points of view are more popular today than omniscient third person, for example. But if you've read many nineteenth-century novels, you've experienced the voice of omniscient narrators. These stories not only explored the interior lives and external conflicts of the characters, but also the social worlds they inhabited. Collective opinions, class distinctions, dollops of history, and technical information abound. There's no need for a character to be contemplating the basics of Utilitarianism or the price of gold for the omniscient narrator to stop the story and helpfully explain philosophy or economics to the reader. Anything at all could be said—as long as it was appropriate to the story and suited the sentiments of the time.

In modern times, there's less interest in omniscience, because there is less of a need to construct a social world for readers to identify with. We no longer read novels to learn "how we live now"; some might say that society is fractured, while others contend that now novelists write for classes other than a narrow middle one. We don't all aspire to a good marriage and a manor house anymore. But we still have an abiding interest in seeing through other people's eyes. And two concepts—the subjective versus the objective and deployment of roving narrators—help to add complexity or complication to fiction.

Objective versus Subjective Narration

Objective narration means that the observing narrator has no opinions and does not editorialize—for example, "The Killers" by Ernest Hemingway. You might call this a "camera's eye view," but I prefer to think of a disinterested human observer. Thinking in overly cinematic terms can lead to bizarre shifts to details like the buttons on someone's shirt, or roving from one character to another. A camera lens can zoom in anywhere but probably shouldn't. When a camera takes off into the recesses of a human ear, or spirals upward toward the moon, it means something profound for the story being told on the screen. Shifts of attention on the page have to be as meaningful.

Sometimes objective point of view is called "dramatic"—that is, it is the point of view of the *audience* watching a drama unfold in the theater. The viewer can see anything on the proscenium stage but can see nothing beyond it about the world, or

nothing too deeply within it—say, what characters are actually thinking as opposed to how they are behaving.

Note that objective narration is very stringent: A single subjective statement by an otherwise objective narrator can make the narration subjective. A subjective narrator can make any number of objective statements, however.

Subjective narration allows for the reader to see the inner thoughts of characters, sometimes but not necessarily presented as dialogue. These thoughts and feelings can also be simply described, limning the narration. If a character wakes up to a day of gray skies, that's objective. If the same character wakes up to a day of bleak and hideous bullshit, that's subjective. To be subjective, information must not be apprehendable simply by observing the scene. Also, another note: If a character's thoughts match his or her actions exactly, the thoughts aren't very interesting and are probably not necessary to share.

As with omniscient narration, if we get to read a character's mind, we get to read it for the entire scene. The narrator cannot simply ignore a character's secret plans. Subjective narration also influences the rhetorical idiom of the narration. *Sam woke up one shitty Monday morning* is an example of subjectivity. Once editorializing emerges, the narrative is subjective. (Note that in "The Killers," there is little to no such editorializing.)

Subjectivity goes beyond the camera. Of course, subjective narrators can make objective statements, but subjectivity colors everything. Not only can we hear a character's thoughts—and indeed, we often *must* hear the most dramatically important thoughts—we see the world as they see it, through their minds, and not just over their shoulders.

Roving Point of View

Having a third-person narrator shift from one character to another is called "roving." (Switching from third person to, say, first person, or second, is best called "alternating" points of view.) Thanks to the influence of TV and movies, many beginning writers like to rove too much. Remember that point of view is a way of signaling to the reader which character or characters are the most important. We don't need to follow everyone, or to hear the innermost thoughts of all characters.

The current fashion is to rove from one point of view to another only between scenes or chapters. "Head-hopping" between characters within a single scene is often frowned upon by editors and, to a lesser extent, by readers. However, there are exceptions. In romance fiction, it is not unusual for the first encounter between the heroine and hero to switch point of view—we read her reaction to him, and his to her, to create a sense of "love at first sight" or destiny.

Roving points of view can be effective, but be careful not to "head-hop" for no good reason. The movie camera has inoculated some readers against roving point of view, but that's because we almost never enter the heads of two characters on screen at the same time. But the camera-eye view seems so intimate that when it comes time to create a similar effect on the page, many writers make the error of telling us every random jejune thought that comes to the mind of the characters in the scene. In film, the point of view may seem to change as shots and reaction shots are shown in quick succession, but in fact, the film's scenic point of view is objective, not roving.

To rove properly, think of the dramatic impact of the scene. A sudden shift to another character's point of view within the same scene can work, but likely not more than once or twice a novel, and that character had better be thinking or experiencing something profound. A change of point of view within a scene is like a "jump cut" in a film; a very powerful technique that is best used sparingly.

However, the opposite can also work—when two characters are experiencing or observing or thinking very nearly the same thing, a shift within a scene from one to another can also work. The classic example of the "meet cute" in a romance novel—a scene in which the female protagonist catches a glance at the male lead and falls in love at first sight, and then the scene is virtually replayed from the male point of view—works because of the near-identical emotions being experienced by both characters. Point of view is ultimately about information, and the most important information a writer can give a reader is information with emotional weight. ✒

- Remind readers of things they may have forgotten
- Reveal the complexity of character relationships

Theoretically, no two characters should speak in the exact same way, and even two characters who do speak in a similar fashion might express themselves differently depending on the context. The dragon hunter who says, "Oh shit!" when cornered by the beast is very different from the ones who say, "Don't kill me—I'll give you gold," or, "Holy crap. I'm an idiot"—or a fourth who **says nothing coherent at all**, but is instead overtaken by a memory of her last good draught of beer sipped at a nearby tavern. Some people even unconsciously mimic the speech patterns of whomever they're talking to.

Sometimes insight into character and dialogue means being silent.

If you're stuck on what someone might say, try to triangulate what you know about the character with the emotional context or conflict of the situation and what they've said up to that point (and how they've said it). Also think less about "Here I need the talking penguin to say 'You know nothing about feathers or my life, you bastard!'" and more about "What would naturally develop out of the drama of this scene?"

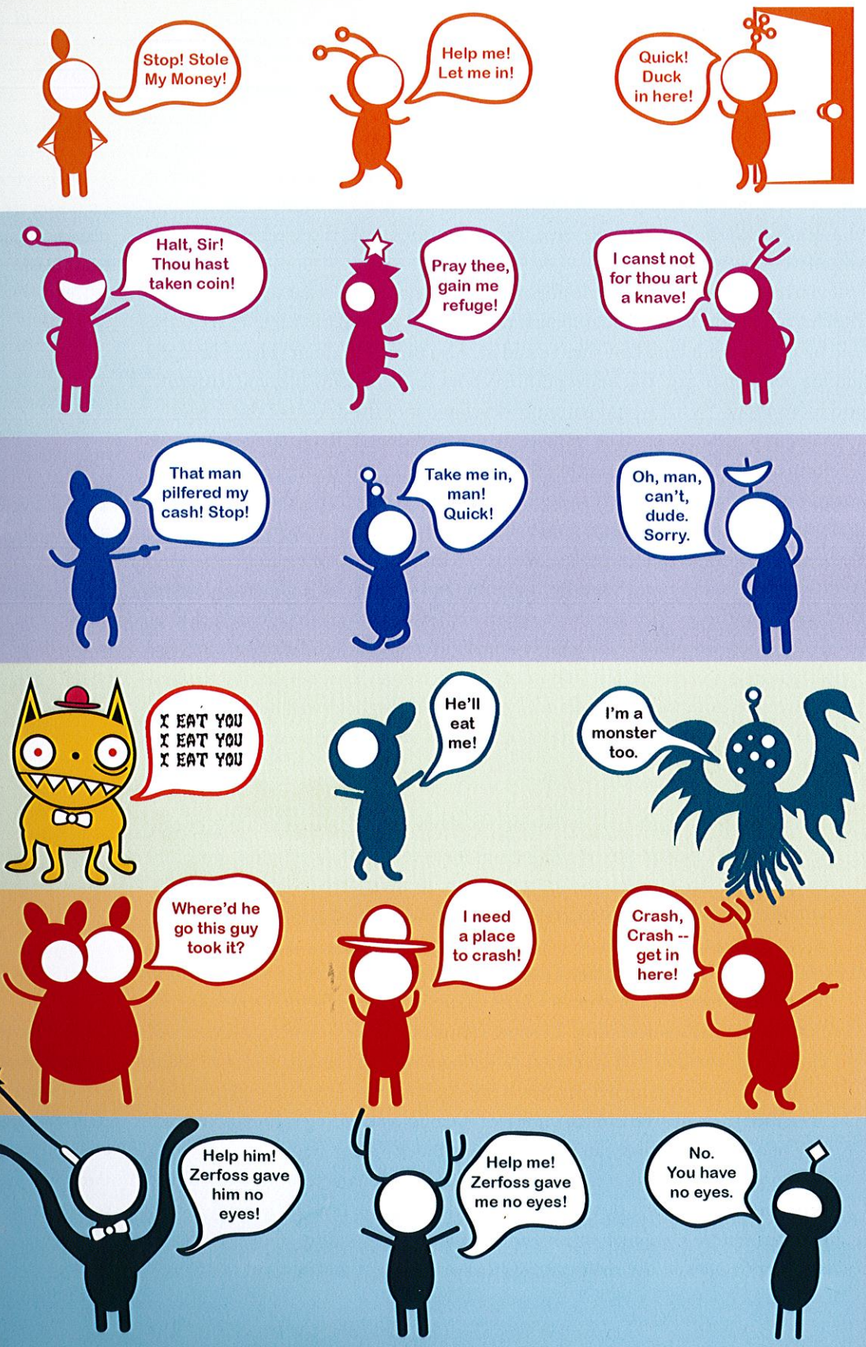
Dialogue is meant to emulate real speech, not reproduce it. Replicating real speech results in chaos and boredom for the most part—just read a transcript of any cocktail party. Your approach should try to approximate how people really sound, but edited, and usually without um's, ahem's, and coughs. Remember, too, that most real people don't speak using perfect grammar. Words are left out. Interruptions occur—and so do misunderstandings. People say one thing but mean another. They say things they don't truly believe because they want to impress or because they want to appear to be other than who they really are. Regional differences affect dialogue, too. I use "jeeze louise" as a curse because part of my family is from Chicago (and Lutheran), but to my wife, Ann, raised in Miami, "jeeze louise" might as well be Portuguese.

Some general rules about uses of dialogue, all of which have been broken at one time or another:

- People generally don't have conversations about basic information they already know *and* the person they're talking to knows too. "I am a penguin, Bob, and as you know because you too are a penguin, penguins are covered in feathers, although in this case, feathers are almost like fur." Pushing information that you think the reader needs into dialogue may be a "tell" that you are having trouble with your story. If one character does lecture another, it should reveal something about that character's personality, level of stress, or other factor. Otherwise, it's not **dramatically interesting**. In some forms of science fiction, a scientist will convey information to a layperson in dialogue—"I've brought you here today to discuss the penguin-seeking death ray developed by Dr. Psychopath"—but even then there may be a much more elegant solution by using summary instead.

  Obvious exceptions include mystery fiction where readers expect explanations through conversations.
- Use of a regional dialect can be a stumbling block for the reader. A compelling reason to use dialect that arises out of the needs of characterization or culture is certainly legitimate. But otherwise just describe the person's general speech patterns before they first speak and/or use a few repeating idiosyncrasies as anchors to convey the difference. Otherwise, too, if you are not intimately

Dialogue in Action



conversant with the dialect in question, there are few more obvious ways for writers to embarrass themselves on the page.

- Some writers use dialogue tags like "he said excitedly" or "the penguin exclaimed boisterously." In most cases, such tags aren't necessary and can actively interfere with the reader's enjoyment of the text. At worst, such tags are insulting to the reader. Good dialogue, aided by references to a character's demeanor or mannerisms, should convey the tone and emotion of what is being said. In a few cases, such as use of sarcasm, dialogue may be ambiguous enough to require a tag. "You're so cultured," Dr. Maim said sardonically to the talking penguin. "Why, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were actually Danger Duck in disguise," the talking penguin mumbled in irritation.

Overuse or bad deployment of dialogue usually takes one of two forms: ***where is everything?*** and ***overstaying your welcome.*** "Where is everything?" refers to encountering pages and pages of dialogue without any anchors of description or other context. Although some writers prefer to write sections of dialogue without exposition, readers may require **some sort of reminder** of setting and the characters before very long.

"Overstaying your welcome" refers to having put too much dialogue on the page. Doing so means that these parts of your scene may seem to drift, formless, and thus slow the pacing of the story without any reward for the reader. In such cases, you should ask yourself:

Unless you're a master of dialogue like Elmore Leonard.

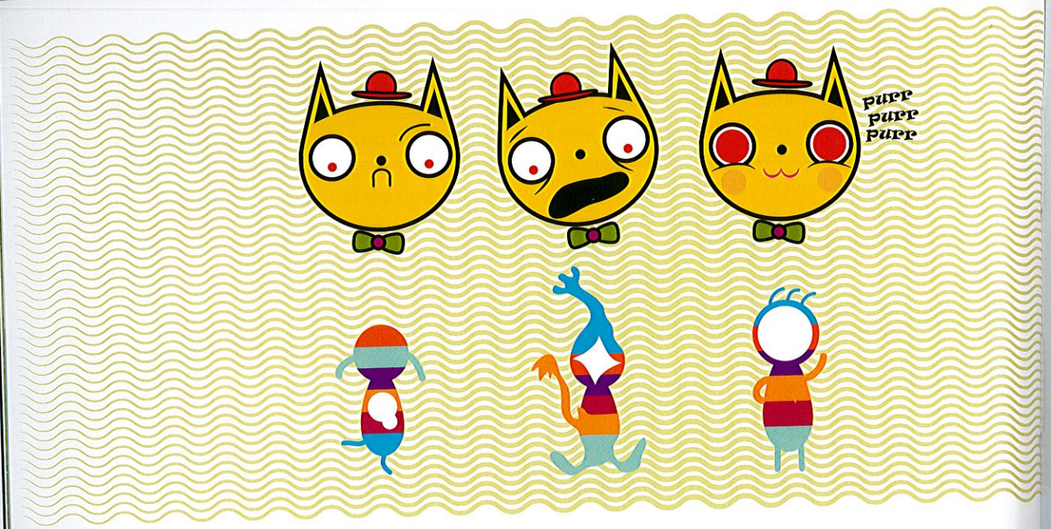
- Are there exchanges within this conversation that I can cut without harming the scene? (When you cut some exchanges, you may find no evidence that the deleted material ever existed.)
- Did I start the conversation too early or end it too late?
- Are there sections of dialogue that would be better conveyed through summary?

Please also recognize that no good ever came from *not* putting dialogue between quotation marks, or use of some other easily noticed way of differentiating dialogue from non-dialogue. Just as readers need paragraph breaks, so too they need quotation marks to anchor them—without which irritation and confusion result. Dr. Maim, you brought me flowers, the penguin said. Are they poisoned? . . . *See?* I'm still convinced that the relative obscurity of the brilliant American writer Edward Whittemore is due to his refusal to use quotation marks.

When in doubt, keep these words from writer Stephen Graham Jones in mind: "The reader doesn't want to hear how stupidly real people talk. No, the reader wants people to talk in poetry, like on the television show *Deadwood*. What the reader wants also is just the meat of the conversation, and sometimes for that meat to be pressed until it bleeds. The job of the writer is just to dip into that blood, keep on writing."

Description

Dialogue can make a character come alive, and move a story forward. But one of the main reasons that your characters, places, and situations seem three-dimensional and real is description. Whether you tell us what your main character is wearing or only



As this artist rendering demonstrates, writers who are sloppy in their description of characters may elicit reactions of indignation and horror from readers. Try to make readers purr instead.

that she has a perpetually arched eyebrow, your use of description helps to define how the reader perceives each moment in your story or novel. Some writers, depending on their style, rely heavily on rich passages of description and others use mostly dialogue with little grace notes of description. Any approach can work, if it's inherent to your personal voice and style. But while I wouldn't want to constrain your personal choices, you can make things easier or harder for yourself, and clearer or less clear for the reader. Keeping at least some of the following points in mind should be of use.

- ***Specific and significant detail is the key to good description.*** In a world conquered by pop culture and LOLCats, part of being original is making sure to use specific details that are not once- or twice-removed from reality. This requires you to be a keen observer of your environment, and to collect details that you can then use in your fiction to good effect. If you receive most of your external stimuli from television, movies, and video games, you may be stunting your ability to write good description. Avoiding clichéd expression can be very difficult; exercises like sitting in a park and trying to word-sketch the people around you can help. You should also learn to give the reader not just a specific detail, but a *significant* detail, where necessary. In other words, it might be evocative to describe that stunning sunset, but how does that moment illuminate character or situation? Perhaps the sunset is significant to the talking penguin as he sits at the seaside bar looking out at the horizon. Perhaps the next day he has to do something difficult and unpleasant, and the fading of the light reminds him soon it will be time. Not every detail has to do that much work—you're allowed an evocative sunset for its own sake—but look for those kinds of opportunities.
- ***Use all five senses to enrich your descriptive powers.*** The best writers don't just give readers what can be heard and seen, but also what can be smelled, tasted, and touched. Although certain modes of modern fiction have moved away from creating an immersive experience, it is still important to vary the

kinds of details you give readers. If you want to convey a convincing illusion of reality, then we need not just the look of panic from your character, and the words, "I don't know where the talking penguin is, honest," but the grain of the wood scratching the speaker's hand as he clutches the dock railing tight and, through the open sliding glass doors beyond, the faint sour smell of a room too-lived in, and the taste on your character's tongue from where he just swallowed something bitter a minute before. Note how this sample description is integrated into the situation, not imposed over the top of it or to the side of it. Employing all five senses does not mean slowing down the pacing to add paragraphs of description (although it can as necessary). It does not mean larding your story with unnecessary verbiage, a common misunderstanding that makes leery some beginning writers who prefer sparse description.

- ***Describe people, settings, and things in the right progressions.*** Jumbled descriptions can be very jarring for readers, as the brain doesn't know how to process what's being read. As Samuel R. Delany and others have noted, people read one line at a time and, on a micro level, one or two words at a time. So if you jump around, it can cause confusion. Describing a person's shirt and then their eyes followed by their feet and then their belt is less useful than describing their eyes, their shirt, their belt, and then their feet. Make sure that your descriptions follow some logical progression, making exceptions for the most critical details. For example, if someone approaches your main character and that person is bleeding profusely from the arm, it is unlikely that your character will first notice that they're wearing a colorful scarf. Conversely, if they're just fine but wearing a red neon scarf, that detail may eclipse all else about them.
- ***When describing people's actions, do not divorce body from mind.*** Your mind is not separate from your body; you do not sit perched in a cranial cage atop your meat-self and operate controls to move your arms or legs. Thought and action are instantaneous to our consciousness. So writing "She turned her eyes to the window and saw the bird" is less accurate than writing "She looked out the window and saw the bird." And, as the award-winning Margo Lanagan pointed out about even this example, "I generally would try to dispense with the looking action altogether: 'A bird landed in the acacia outside the window and cleaned its beak against a branch." In the worst cases, this robotic crane-operator approach can be laughable: "He had his hand pat her shoulder and then swiveled his eyes to look at her in the face." (A related mistake is having eyes rather than one's gaze "wander around the room," which can be especially confusing in surreal and fantastical fiction.) Exceptions include outliers, like situations where a character may be injured and is moving a limb by a force of will.
- ***Use figurative language appropriately.*** Figurative language largely refers to the use of similes and metaphors in your fiction. A simile compares one thing with another thing of a different kind and generally uses "like" or "as." A metaphor applies a word or phrase to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. Here's an example of a simile: "Her hair was as white as snow." Here's an example of a metaphor: "Again, I suffered a conversation with my acquaintance the toad." (Unless, of course, you're writing a fantasy novel in which toads talk.)

But a description also tells us how the character experiences the world. Therefore, if your character really is distanced from his/her own body or surroundings, this would actually work. — **Karin Tidbeck**

Similes and metaphors are highly unstable—susceptible not just to the appropriateness of the core comparison you make, but the tone and texture of those comparisons. For example, although "Her hair was as white as snow" is a cliché, "Her hair was as white as milk" sounds wrong because the texture of milk doesn't match the texture of hair. Yes, both are white, but they still have to have more tactile points of commonality. In this example, you could conceivably write "Her wet hair was as white as milk," with "wet" changing the texture to something more suitable, but it's still a stretch and doesn't really work. Similarly, describing a helicopter as looking like an airborne tadpole might make some sense in terms of shape (sans propellers) but a tadpole is squishy and a helicopter is hard. Comparing a helicopter to a hummingbird might be closer, if the reader equates a helicopter's movement with that of a hummingbird and views the metallic colors of the bird as comparable to the metallic texture of a helicopter. If you are tone-deaf to the uses of figurative language, you will discover this early on and should perhaps limit how you deploy them.

A couple additional pitfalls bear mentioning. First and foremost, make sure that you are comparing different things. If you write "The panther leapt like a big cat," you are really saying "The big cat leapt like a big cat," which is a waste of the reader's time. In addition, remember that metaphors and similes tend to catch the reader's attention more than the words around them. So you usually create added emphasis by using them (unless your work is nothing but figurative language). Don't use them just to bolster description or you will wind up making the most mundane actions, ones you want to occur more or less invisibly to the reader, carry unwanted added significance. The result may be to **render the important part invisible.**

"Pass the butter," she said, looking like a beagle being eaten by an obese raven. "I'm leaving you," he replied.

For more on figurative language, I highly recommend Mark Doty's *The Art of Description*, perhaps the finest book of its type I have ever read. Within its pages you will find some wonderful ideas about figurative language, like the need for it to have a quality of resistance, show us something new, potentially juxtapose the natural and the artificial, and much more.

- ***Study poetry for interesting approaches to description.*** Poetry truly does contain a richness of approaches to description and, in particular, figurative language. While the compression found in poetry, the weight of words, is not as applicable to most fiction, the lessons you can learn from studying poetry will expand your own range of technique in this area. Take, for example, these great lines from Alex Lemon's poem "Other Good," taken from the collection *Mosquito*: "Anesthesia dumb, scalpel-paste/Rawing my tongue, I found/Myself starfished In sky/Spinning days . . . " How beautifully these lines capture the sensation of disorientation, and in such clear, precise, and yet gritty language!
- ***Keep in mind the (irrational) power of some types of description.*** Images can have great power, and subtextual weight. Our subconscious minds are often able to bring onto the page very strange and arresting images that resonate and have an almost dream-like significance. As Michael Moorcock wrote in his essay "Exotic Landscape," the work of visionaries "may not be judged by normal criteria but by the power of their imagery and by what extent their writing evokes that power, whether trying to convey wildness, strangeness, or charm; whether like Melville, Ballard, Patrick White, or Alejo Carpentier they transform their images into intense personal metaphor, or, like Bunyan, give us simple allegory." Moorcock was writing about setting, but the point applies to imagery generally. If you find that you have written an image that seems inexplicable or illogical but still seems to generate energy, that seems luminous or to have hidden significance, be careful not to change that moment too much, or to cut it just because it doesn't seem entirely functional in your narrative.

Style

As noted, style in fiction is the arrangement of words in a story by the writer. If the writer is said to have a distinctive style, it is because the writer's voice has found expression in a unique way that resonates with the reader. Style is the means by which the writer's subject matter, passions, and interests reach their fullest expression on the page. Most writers fall not just between Ernest Hemingway and Angela Carter, but also between Chagall and Picasso in terms of style. What do I mean? Chagall always painted more or less in the same style, with small variations of tone and subject matter, and became iconic doing so. Picasso, on the other hand, mastered many styles and expressed them all through his painting.

Most writers are neither as sparse as Hemingway nor as lush as Carter in terms of style, nor as single-minded as Chagall or as varied as Picasso. Instead, a certain range exists, emanating from a base style, depending on the demands of a particular story or novel. Complicating the issue are elements like the use of first-person narrators with their own distinctive way of saying things and third- or second-person narratives that create a need to, in a sense, replicate another approach to style: that of the main character.

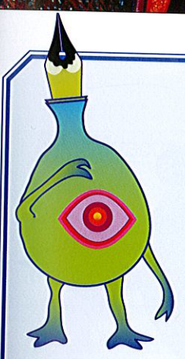
Within that context, then, here are a few general points about style that should provide food for thought, or for enraged food fights. Either reaction is desirable; your indifference is not.

- ***Each and every story must be told in the style best suited for it,*** whether simple and unadorned or convoluted and ornate. The wider your range, the more types of stories and types of characters you can animate. Therefore, as you develop as a writer, think about what constitutes your "base style" and find ways to alter it by context or through mechanically making changes to allow it to achieve different effects.
- ***Inasmuch as a story has depth (or depth perception), it achieves this quality*** not just through insight about the human condition, society, or an individual character, but also through expression of its central passion or focus ***via a style that has depth,*** one that can "multitask," to use a horrible word. Skillful writing isn't just about "telling a good story," because you can't tell a good story if your style works against you. Every sentence or paragraph can perform many complex functions simultaneously, and in ways unique to each individual writer. Complexity does not necessarily mean writing lush prose; many great styles that create complex, nuanced, layered effects are invisible.

THREE DRAGONS IN THREE STYLES

Scott Eagle cover painting for *City of Saints and Madmen* (2001) by Jeff VanderMeer.

- ***Some writers' styles cannot multitask, or cannot lithely pivot*** as might be needed, but instead can only grandly and with ponderous weight turn like a flaming funeral barge or a baroque, jewel-encrusted mechanical elephant. This quality—which can itself be a strength—is, again, not necessarily a function of the sparse or ornate aspect of a style but more a function of tone, context, and how the parts of a scene work together. Don't be mad that you're a flaming funeral barge rather than a schooner skimming the waves: Own your barge-hood, and make of your style all that it can be.
- ***Artists and writers are somewhat similar with regard to style,*** although they have different goals and different ideas of what constitutes "story." Crudely speaking, an artist creates a painting by using colors applied via brushstrokes. The size, shape, and texture of these marks on the canvas are dictated by the type of brush, the type of paint, and the individual approach to where and how they create the brushstrokes. How they mix and layer the paint also affects the result. The resulting image may seem to exist independent of those myriad decisions, but it has no such autonomy. The individual decisions that find expression through a writer's style may not enter into a reader's thoughts about why they liked or disliked a story, even though, were that person to view a painting, they might think about the use of charcoal rather than watercolor, oil as opposed to acrylics, and the different effects achieved by the short, stippling brushstrokes in the middle versus the long, wide strokes at the edges. Yet the process for a writer is, to some extent, the same.



WRITING CHALLENGE

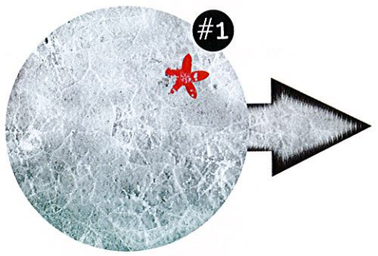
The artist Scott Eagle used many different approaches to "style" in creating the piece of art above. The cut-apart work of masters like Bruegel forms a collage of a city. A photograph of irregular stones resembles a street. He also painted parts of the image, including the flames in the background. Eagle then painted over the collaged parts taken from other paintings to make the light fall consistently. The result has cohesion and an oddly consistent texture despite the disparate elements he brought together.

For this exercise, choose a subject (for example, mushrooms or dive bars) and gather materials related to that subject from at least four different text sources written in diverse styles and/or points of view, including essays and short stories. Identify the parts of each that could be used to create a two- to three-paragraph passage of description. Then collage those parts together without changing the words. Keeping as many of the original words as is feasible, rewrite the passage to smooth out any "klang" in tone, mood, or texture. Finally, rewrite the passage again so it reflects not just your style but also the point of view of a character (who may bring their own style to the description).

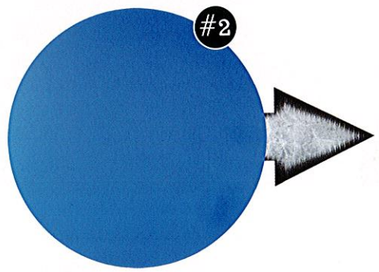
APPROACHES TO STYLE

EXAMPLES

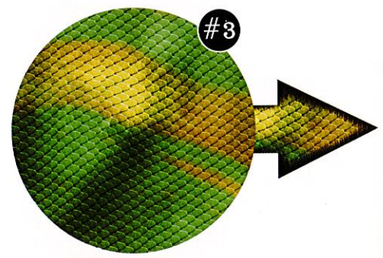
"He walked out to the main road, turned, limped toward the main gates. A man was dead, murdered, or perhaps very much alive. Borchert was playing with him, and perhaps the others were as well. The night was cool, cloudless. Where was this place? He turned and looked back, saw the building he was staying in, the only light being that of his own room."—Brian Evenson, "The Brotherhood of Mutilation"



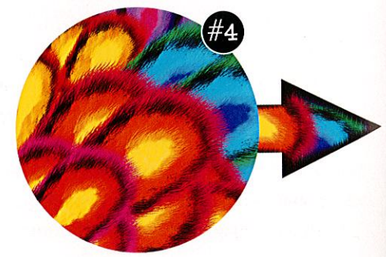
"Amy Fremont got up from the rocking chair, and came across the porch. She was a tall woman, thin, a smiling vacancy in her eyes. About a year ago, Anthony had gotten mad at her, because she'd told him he shouldn't have turned the cat into a cat-rug. Although he had always obeyed her more than anyone else, which was hardly at all, this time he'd snapped at her. With his mind. And that had been the end of Amy Fremont's bright eyes, and the end of Amy Fremont as everyone had known her."—"It's a *Good* Life," Jerome Bixby



"A moment I float beneath her, a starry shadow. Distant canyons where spectral lightning flashes: neurons firing as I tap into the heart of the poet, the dark core where desire and horror fuse and Morgan turns ever and again to stare out a bus window. The darkness clears. I taste for an instant the metal bile that signals the beginning of therapy, and then I'm gone."—Elizabeth Hand, "The Boy in the Tree"



"Stilt-legs scissoring, snip-snap! the bird gods dance. Old craneycrows, a skulk of powers. How they strut and ogle with their long eyes, knowing. How they serpentine their necks. And stalking, how they flirt their tails, insouciant as Groucho. Fugue and counter-fugue, the music jigs and sneaks. On tiptoe, solemnly, they hop and flap; they whirl and whet their long curved clever bills."—Greer Gilman, "Down the Wall"



Devil's Advocate

- almost any style can seem lush or invisible in the right context
- any style can achieve many different effects

Representative Writers

(many may deploy a range of styles across their fiction)

#1 Minimal / Stark

Sparse, understated prose that often relies on inference and suggestion. Use of detail is minimal but may be more powerful in isolation. Descriptions are rare and take on significance common to poetry. Poor execution leaves no purchase for the reader and induces boredom and sometimes contempt. Characterization relies in part on what's not said, or not expressed.

- Samuel Beckett
- Raymond Carver
- Brian Evenson
- Ernest Hemingway
- Amy Hempel

TRANSITIONAL → *Carol Emshwiller*

#2 Invisible / "Normal"

The "baseline" approach common to much fiction, especially in commercial modes, picks its spots with balance in scene/summary and judicious use of sensory detail. Immersive reading is usually the goal. Few long sentences. Poor execution induces a reaction of "mediocrity."

- Octavia Butler
- Daphne Du Maurier
- Joe Haldeman
- Mary Doria Russell
- Karin Tidbeck
- Kurt Vonnegut

TRANSITIONAL → *Karen Joy Fowler*

#3 Muscular / Conspicuous

Sentence structures tend to be more complex and summary/half-scene is employed in a more layered way, with time perhaps more easily manipulated as a result. Character POVs may be differentiated as much by style as content. Ample use of extended metaphor and sensory detail. Poor execution induces a reaction of "too clever" or "lost the thread."

- Martin Amis
- Michael Cisco
- Elizabeth Hand
- Ursula K. Le Guin
- Kelly Link
- Joyce Carol Oates
- Ben Okri

#4 Lush / Ornate

TRANSITIONAL → *China Miéville*

Word play, extended (sometimes raucous) metaphors, and self-conscious approaches may occur, with longer sentences and descriptive passages likely. The paragraphs exist to advance story and showcase the words. Characterization can occur through stylistic exaggeration. Poetic meter may be present. Reverie and hyperbole become more foregrounded. Poor execution induces a sense of thickness, "encrustedness," and a lack of emotional resonance.

- K. J. Bishop
- Angela Carter
- Robert Coover
- Rikki Ducornet
- Jamaica Kincaid
- Tanith Lee
- Mervyn Peake
- Salman Rushdie
- Catherynne M. Valente

Some people believe that style is merely an overlay, rather than intrinsic to the skin, the flesh and blood, of a story. In part this is because although we can talk about style as a separate element, like dialogue, it functions in a different way. An element like dialogue forms a discrete, finite series of units within a story: It exists in certain places and not in other places. Style, however, *permeates*. It *inhabits*. It exists at the particle level of this creature we call fiction. If you are a writer as sensitive to uses of language as Greer Gilman, it doesn't exist just in sentence and syllable—it exists in each meaning and derivation of every word from the beginning of written history. Thus, as you read, the words form additional layers of association that constitute a very unique style.

Put another way: Style is not story. If it were, then, as writer Matthew Cheney has observed, fiction in translation would convey no true sense of what happens in a story, or even any idea of the tone and texture of the author's original style. But as surely as each element of plot or character or structure deployed throughout your fiction affects your story, so, too, does style, on a very personal and microscopic level. Give three talented writers with unique voices the exact same events to write about, in the same order, and, by virtue of their style, those stories will seem very different. The particles known as words *accumulate*, each sentence building up or changing, in ways both minute and potentially earthshaking, our perception of characters, the mood, and events. Through the weight of each decision, many instinctual, what we write is different than it could have been—ghost phrases and sentences spinning off by what we discard, creating millions of pocket universes filled with layers of other versions of story. And by this same process we make our mark as to how we differ from *that* writer, and *that other* writer, and even that talking penguin trying to write over in the corner above the noise and drama of this instructional text.

The Greater and Lesser Mysteries

Allied with the seven elements are other components that factor into the creation of narrative. For various reasons, these cannot be termed "elements" because they are not, strictly speaking, as quantifiable, or they exist at a different hierarchical level. Hopefully, this brief discussion will help clear up any confusion about, for example, form versus structure, or what voice means in relation to tone.

Voice. This term, like style, can be slippery, but it basically refers to some quality of the writer's style and worldview that comes through in every piece of fiction, no matter how the writer's style varies from story to story. Many writers talk of "finding their voice" as they develop, and this generally means that they have achieved enough mastery over the elements of story and assimilated their core influences to the extent that their innate uniqueness now comes across in more concentrated form on the page. Writers can be encouraged in ways that allow them to more easily find a unique voice,

but in general finding one's voice is a private process of discovery and exploration, and it matures in ways that cannot be quantified.

Tone. The tone of fiction refers to the atmosphere created and the mood evoked. The tone can fluctuate greatly within a story, depending on the effects required to make individual scenes a success. Examples of tone include serious, playful, terrifying, exciting, creepy, and sad. Tone is created not just by word choice, but also through the rhythms and lengths of the sentences, the images evoked, and the descriptions. The tone is at the service of the style, which must be flexible enough to allow for the necessary changes in tone throughout the narrative. Stories trying to achieve a single effect must display at least some agility in this area; to avoid devolving into *monotone* during longer narratives, suppleness and variety are even more important. Control of tone can be useful in other ways. An inappropriate tone can be used as a counterpoint to the events depicted in a story. Sometimes this results in humor. Other times, it can help make fresh some aspect of the human condition to which many have become indifferent due to overexposure.

Vladimir Nabokov's use of the language of the vacation brochure to describe internment camps in *Bend Sinister* makes it impossible for the reader not to engage with the horror of such places.

Structure. This term refers to what you could call the arrangement, pattern, or design of the story, as you will learn in Chapter 4. We are preconditioned to think of structure in terms of plot, but structure is about how things happen and when as much as about *what* happens.

Theme. When we talk about a story's subtext or what the story means beyond the events described on the page, generally we are zeroing in on *theme*. Theme is a tricky subject, because even if a writer decides to write a story about social injustice or love or death, what occurs on the page is usually much more complex and not reducible to slogans or abstract ideas. Thus, to talk about the "theme" of a story is to erase or render invisible many of the narrative's other attributes. The other reason theme is less useful to the fiction writer than other inhabitants of the fiction ecosystem is that theme tends to occur organically in a writer's work, in their rough drafts, in a way somewhat akin to *voice*. Like voice, it can recur regardless of conscious thought. Having a general idea of what theme means, along with examples, is helpful, but too much self-conscious examination of theme while writing can freeze a writer or render the writer pompous or didactic. However, figuring out what themes you've been exploring can be of use during revision. It can help you decide what things to emphasize or deemphasize, as long as theme is considered only in the context of many other concerns.

Form. As distinguished from plot or structure, *form* can refer to the shape created by a story's structure *or* refer to the type of narrative you are creating, whether a novel, novella, short story, or poem. Some writing guides also refer to form as being similar to voice—meaning a somewhat amorphous element that conveys a liminal overlay of meaning in a story. What is most probably meant in this latter case is simply that all of the elements of the story have worked so perfectly in tandem, and matched so perfectly the vision in the writer's head, that the effect on the reader seems miraculous and cathartic.