



ARDITH'S NOTEBOOK

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EDITORIAL

50 Questions to Ask Yourself about Your Manuscript

“Writing is like a sculpture where you remove, you eliminate in order to make the work visible. Even those pages you remove somehow remain. There is a difference between a book of two hundred pages from the very beginning, and a book of two hundred pages, which is the result of an original eight hundred pages. The six hundred pages are there. Only you don't see them.”

— Elie Wiesel

You know the basics of good fiction writing: show, don't tell; build tension to a climax and then resolve it; know your subject; and so on.... But, how do you actually know if you've followed these rules in your work? Here are some questions to ask yourself when you're trying to improve your writing. Be honest and use them as a guide to really look carefully at what you've got on paper.

When you look over your story, check to make sure all your major scenes are there, including the connections and transitions you developed in your plot outline. Remember that, although most stories can be held accountable to this checklist, some stories have their own rules. If this is true of your work, make sure that your “own rules” are not merely excuses. And if you come up with some idiosyncratic rules, hold your story accountable to them.

Plot

1. Does enough happen in your story? Something must happen: the event need not be huge, but it must be dramatic and significant.
2. Is the story structured around a conflict? Could you state the conflict in a sentence or two?
3. Do you introduce your conflict soon enough, preferably as a crisis in the first couple of pages? Do you sustain the conflict long enough to create tension?
4. Is the conflict carried to its logical conclusion?
5. Does the ending make sense in relation to the beginning?
6. Can you identify the key event and its climax? This should be the turning point: you've reached the peak and now things inevitably slide, faster and faster, to a conclusion. Before this, there were options, but now the protagonist's choice has become clear.
7. Does the story give us enough information on the causes of the main event? Although the advice remains “show, don't tell”, whenever you can't show us enough, tell us. Summarize, fill us in. Don't leave your reader in the dark.
8. Do you present the reader with the right sequence of events (scenes and summaries) so that the story has the cogency of a good argument?
9. Do you have a stock plot? Avoid plots that we've seen too often before, for example, the detective investigating a murder is actually the murderer.
10. Is the plot easy to follow?

Character

11. Who are the protagonists and antagonists?

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12. Are the main characters well developed? Are they round?

If not, give them sufficient complexity, desires, obstacles, weaknesses, and strengths.

13. Are there flat characters? All the characters in a story need not be equally fully drawn, but minor characters should not be stereotypes.

14. Can you find out the basic motivation (desires and fears) of the main characters?

15. Do the characters encounter any obstacles? Are the obstacles sufficiently tough?

16. Does the main character change or come to some crucial insight in the course of the story?

Setting

17. Is the setting appropriate? Authentic?

18. Does your setting work with your characters and plot?

The setting should deepen your characterization and ground your plot.

19. Have you established the setting gradually, together with the characters and action?

20. Have you used the setting for special effects (foreshadowing, mood expression, change of pace)?

Point of View

21. From whose POV is the story told? Could you tell it better from another POV?

22. Is the POV consistent? If it does shift, is there a good reason for it to do so?

23. If you use the omniscient POV, do you enter too many heads?

24. Do you use interior monologues to your advantage?

25. Whom does the narrator of your story address?

26. Who are you, as the author, addressing? An imaginary person, or a friend, or nobody?

27. Are there authorial intrusions? Are they warranted?

Voice, Attitude and Humour

28. What voices do you hear in the story? Are the voices distinctive?

29. Do you joke at inappropriate times? Are the jokes in poor taste?

Timing

30. Does your story start at the right moment? Identify the first crisis moment and open with that.

31. Does the story end at the right moment?

32. Do you cover enough time in the story? Or too much?

33. Is the chronology, and the grammar that indicates it, clear?

34. If you've used flashbacks or memories, did you need to? Could you tell the story from the first event to the last without backtracking?

35. Has the story been paced well?

Production: Stock photos

Most book covers are improved by a powerful image. But where do you find a picture that sums up your words? You can ask a professional photographer—or a skillful amateur—for a suitable image, or you can turn to one of the many stock photo agencies to be found on the Web.

These agencies provide high-quality, versatile photographs for books and magazines. You can search their databases and choose from a wide selection of available pictures. If you are confused by some of the terms they use, here are some tips:

Model release: this means that the people in the photo have agreed to its being used in public. Don't use a photo you took at your friend's birthday party on your book cover unless all the people in it have given you permission—in writing!

Royalty free: This means the photographer has sold the image to the agency for a one-time fee. The

agency will charge you a small sum for the use of the photo, but you won't have to pay more every time you use it.

Photo credit: This is where you identify the photographer, if you know their name, and the agency. When you buy a photo, or download a free one, you must carefully read the "terms of use." These will tell you what words to use in your photo credit. If a friend has given you a photo to use for your book cover, it's polite to credit them on the back cover. Say "Cover photo by..." or "Author photo by ..."

Rights clearance: If you have a specific image in mind, and you don't mind paying to use it, a photo agency can help you secure the right to use it. For a fee, they will contact the photographer's representative and make sure you have legal permission to reproduce that photo in your book. Sometimes you can do this research yourself. Don't take a chance and as-

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Scene and Dialogue

36. Is the dialogue natural?
37. Do the characters sound different from the general narrative and from each other?
38. Is your dialogue complex enough?
39. Do you have enough dialogue in proportion to the narrative?
40. Is your story told mostly as a non-scenic narrative? If so, your story will sound like an essay: decide where the action is, and stage it.
41. Are the right scenes dramatized and the right ones summarized?
42. Do you have too many similar scenes?
43. Are your dramatic scenes long enough?
44. Are the dramatic scenes suspenseful enough?

Description and Diction

45. Do you show enough?
46. Do you describe your characters in a fresh way?
47. Do you genuinely describe settings?
48. Do you have enough dynamic descriptions incorporated into the action?
49. Are there enough metaphors? Too many? Do they work?
50. Are the descriptions effective? Do they engage our senses?

Production: Stock photos • continued from Production page 4

sume that the photographer won't find out if you've stolen an image. They might, and then you'll end up paying more.

Resolution: Many agencies post "low resolution" photos on their websites. This allows you to see what the images look like, but if you try to download them

and use them in print, they'll look very small and blurry. You need a high-resolution image, at least 300 dots per inch or dpi, to reproduce it in print. Once you've registered with the agency, and paid the fee if there is one, you will receive the high-resolution version of your image to use.

Some photo agencies

www.iStockphoto.com: Canadian, very reasonable rates.

www.Profotos.com: a clickable directory of dozens of photo agencies, worldwide

www.Public-domain-photos.com: particularly good for landscape scenes

www.Everystockphoto.com: another useful search engine for free photos

www.Corbisimages.com: represents some of the big names in sports and editorial photography

www.Bridgemanart.com : vast collection of fine art for reproduction from the Bridgeman Art Library

www.GettyImages.ca: Getty is arguably the world's biggest image bank