

Errors of SUBSTANCE

In isolating the most common mistakes, our writer tells you how to find the singular events, fresh stories and telling details that boost your work beyond the clichéd and the routine

By Peter Selgin

Last month we examined three of the six most common errors afflicting the works of beginning—and even advanced—fiction writers. Those were errors of structure and included, briefly, inept or arbitrary handling of point of view, failure to distinguish between active story and background or flashback, and capricious or manipulative withholding of vital information in order to generate what I call “false” suspense.

This month we turn to errors of substance, to problems that arise from the fundamental choices authors make—namely, what to write about. Because it deals with fundamentals, you might assume that this half of the article should have been published first. But as you’ll see when you come to the end, all six of these problems share a single, primary source, so it really doesn’t matter in what order they’re approached. Look to the source, and there you may find the solution to all six problems.

1 The status-quo, or Ho-Hum Syndrome: Failure to distinguish between events and routine. No matter how intrinsically exotic or sensational our characters’ routines may be, readers are not interested in routine. Say you’ve written a story set in the future. In that future

your hero, Matt Starhopper, travels on the first day of each month to a space station located on B1620-26, the farthest known planet at the core of the globular M4 cluster. Along the way he encounters the usual ominous space aliens, treacherous asteroid fields and gravitational follies. His journey is rendered with a Flemish master’s eye for scrupulous detail, an astronomer’s love of planetary lore, and a speculative imagination that would make Jules Verne blush.

And yet as she turns the pages, our dear reader, though she loves science fiction, admires the author’s work, and finds it stylish and authentic, feels her attention flag. Her pulse slows, her eyelids droop. She closes the book and decides to watch *Jeopardy!* instead. Why? What’s gone wrong?

In a word, routine. Consciously or not, the reader understands that, how-

ever sensational from a 21st-century earthling’s perspective, Matt Starhopper has taken this same voyage dozens of times: Nothing on the page suggests otherwise, just as nothing on the page suggests that this voyage departs in any significant way from the others. On the contrary, our reader knows she’s being told not of a specific but of a *general* voyage. So she pushes forward, gallantly, in the hope of encountering those two blessed words that signal the start of a true fictional journey: “One day ...”

It’s that “one day” (or its equivalent) that pricks the reader’s ears, saying, “Something extraordinary is about to happen.” The key word here is “extraordinary,” an antonym of “routine,” and also the antidote for it.

Whether your characters journey daily to a distant moon or just down the street to the corner bar, what matters to the reader is the singular event that distinguishes one such voyage from all others and makes for a story worth telling. Grandma Jenkins maneuvering herself and her walker down the hall may not be worth reporting *until* the day she falls, breaks her femur, and finds herself immobile in a house in the woods in a snowstorm with only a few hours of fuel oil left. *That’s* worth reporting.

It’s worth reporting not because it’s sensational (though it is), but because it’s extraordinary: It is specific, it is not

general. And just as when describing things and people concrete trumps abstract, and specific trumps general, so it is with storytelling as a whole.

The conditional tense kills. So often in amateur stories, readers are told what a character “would” (generally) do. “Hal Conklin would sit on the steps of the town hall with a bag over his head and both middle fingers held erect for all to see who passed him by.” This is all very well and fine, but as routine far less effective than, “That Friday, Hal Conklin sat on the steps of the town hall with a shopping bag over his head and both middle fingers held erect for all who passed by.” When in your own work you find yourself leaning hard on “would,” realize you may be stuck in routine mode. Dramatize a specific event and have it stand for the routine.

Generalizations are even more troubling when applied to dialogue.

“What’s the matter, kid, don’t like blue stockings?” my father would say.

“No,” I’d answer. “And what’s more, I don’t like stockings!”

The suggestion that this exchange took place on several occasions is off-putting; I’d bet that, unless it was part of some Abbott and Costello-like routine, it didn’t. That the author puts the dialogue in quote marks increases both its authority and my doubts about his narrator’s reliability. And though occasionally narrators may be unreliable, their unreliability should be germane to the story, not incidental to it.

Other words to watch out for: “always,” “whenever,” “usually,” “typically.” Steady use of such words is symptomatic of writing in background or routine mode, creating a pattern of predictable behavior against which, presumably, you intend to juxtapose exceptional events. But readers will tolerate only so much background before demanding that the tacit promise of a real story be fulfilled.

Example: A student tells me how, as a

young man, he worked as a “flagger” in his father’s crop-dusting business. “A flagger,” he explains, “is the guy holding a flag and marking off space so the pilot can line up on something and not lose his place in the field. I did this every May, June and July from age 6 to 25.” How, asks the student, might he work this material into a successful story? Answer: by finding the hook of *specific incident or event* to hang it from. *One day, while flagging Jim’s soy field ...*

Another example: A young woman visits her barely coherent father in his nursing home, as she’s done daily for the past two years. Of such a plot readers may well ask, “What makes this day different from any other day?” On closer examination, we find that on this day, the young woman does do several things that depart from routine:

1. She stops on the way to visit the house where she grew up.
2. She reminisces with her father about her dead sister, Rose.
3. She talks to a boy working behind the counter at a bakery.
4. She meets the boy for lunch.

Though the story of a woman’s routine visit to her father offers little hope for plot or catharsis, any one of the *specific events* I’ve listed holds more than hope. (For my money, I’d go with the bakery boy and develop his relationship with the woman into a love affair.) Whatever event is exploited, a story needs events and incidents: They are what put the status quo where it belongs, in the background.

In fiction as in life, exceptions prove rules. By putting our characters into extraordinary situations, we can best appreciate their “ordinary” lives.

CHOOSE
MATERIAL CLOSE
TO YOU IN SPIRIT, THAT
MEANS SOMETHING
TO YOU.

2 **Imitation story, or the ‘Gee-This-Sounds-Familiar Syndrome’:** *Cliché at the root of conception.* Someone writes a story about a police officer involved in a botched drug bust. The story is set in Spanish Harlem, where Emil Bermudez, a rookie fresh from the academy and his

partner, Boris, stake out a bodega. In the process Emil falls hard for Dulce, sister of the drug-dealing bodega owner.

Need I fill in the rest? In the climactic scene, Emil, seeing Dulce reach for her “weapon,” draws and fires. Alas, she had been reaching for the love note Emil wrote her the day before—or a Snickers bar. She dies in Emil’s arms.

If the characters and situation seem familiar, it’s because they are: We’ve seen them (or something close) a hundred times before in as many cop shows. That the story’s problems may be solvable, or redeemed by an impeccable style, hardly matters; they *shouldn’t* be solved.

For beginning writers, the temptation to choose intrinsically dramatic subjects is hard to resist. Drug busts, murder, kidnapping, rape, abortion, war—with such sensational material, how can you go wrong? The problem with sensational subjects is that, because they’re sensational, they have been treated to death—in fiction, film and TV. Result: a minefield of sentimentality and clichés. And as Martin Amis tells us, “All good writing is a war against cliché.” One of the first steps to winning that war is not to charge hell-for-leather into the minefield.

How to avoid cliché at the root of conception? Practice sincerity. “Sincerity,” Jorge Luis Borges wrote, “isn’t a moral choice, but an aesthetic one.” If we’ve come by such material honestly, through our own *personal* experience or imagination, we may rightly claim it as our own. Otherwise, we should steer a wide berth, lest we find ourselves co-opting other works. When we create stories that are derivative, we’re not being honest with ourselves. We’re borrowing someone else’s aesthetics and pawning them off as our own. We do it out of fear, calculating that, whatever they lack in originality, “used stories” make up for it by being tried and true.

The way to make material your own is to look for it in yourself. That sounds corny, but how can you imagine something when it’s already been pre-imagined for you? If your object is merely to tell a story, any story, that may not be enough. It should be a story that only *you* can tell, as only you can tell it. Authors of imitation stories fear boring

their audiences with material that's close to them in spirit but superficially banal, so instead they dish up melodramas recycled from old movies. But the end result bores, because the author's genuine material, the good stuff, the stuff that means something to him, has been denied us in favor of yesterday's *poshlost* microwaved and served lukewarm.

Good stories *have* been written about drug busts gone bad, but they've been written by people with fresh insights. Maybe they've known cops or crooks well enough to tell their stories with a fresh angle or twist. Or they've mined their imaginations for the essential truths of those characters in those situations. Keats said, *I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affection and the truth of imagination*. The truth of imagination is accessible not through other people's stories or derivations, but through our own unique experiences. Whether those experiences are real or dreams doesn't matter, as long as they're genuine, and as long as they're *ours*.

Do I mean write autobiographically? No. I mean write *personally*. Choose material close to you in spirit, that means something to you. Imagine the book or story you'd most like to read and, as a J.D. Salinger character once advised, "sit down shamelessly and write the thing yourself."

3 Vestigial autobiography, or 'The What I Did on My Summer Vacation' Syndrome: Failure to distinguish between memoir and fiction. In a story about a woman tormented by solitude in a desert landscape to which she has recently been transplanted, we learn that before coming to New Mexico, Lily had a talent for wine-tasting, that she practices astrology and reads the classics, that she earned her graduate degree in medieval history late in life, that she comes from "a city where even the secretaries have bachelor's degrees," that after graduating she worked briefly as a caterer and bookkeeper. Until age 16, when she moved in with her senator uncle in D. C., she lived on a tobacco farm.

All these things we learn about Lily, and yet we know practically nothing about her. We don't know why she left

the East Coast, or how she ended up in the desert of New Mexico, or why she feels so unhappy there.

What usually gives autobiographical content away is that it serves no clear purpose in a story. The specific details about Lily that I listed ought to furnish us with strong clues not only to why she has ended up where she is, but to *who* she is, and possibly even to her destiny. To do so, such facts must be carefully selected and not randomly snatched out of an autobiographical grab bag. Even assuming that the facts listed have been chosen with some purpose, still, there are too many of them. They tumble over each other like lobsters in a tank.

Though fiction and memoir both fall under the broad category of narrative prose, and though each form avails itself of any or all of the devices used in fiction (dialogue, description, etc.), the differences between these forms should not be overlooked or underestimated. The two genres are, if not antithetical to each other, fundamentally different. Both are types of narrative prose. But while fiction is powered by imagination, memoir has memory humming under its hood. To the extent the memoirist uses her imagination, she undermines her purpose, which is to tell—not just essentially, but factually—the truth. And to the extent that the fiction writer relies on memory, he weighs down his imagination and keeps it from taking flight.

Can the two forms successfully intersect? Yes. Some of the greatest works of literature tow the line between fiction and memoir, including Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Nikos Kazantzaki's *Zorba the Greek*, Henry Miller's Tropic books and most of James Joyce. Here, the authors' voices and worldviews are cast in bronze: In their hands, autobiography surmounts its limits to become poetry, history, philosophy—even (with *Zorba* and *On the Road*) a kind of pagan bible or user's manual. They are not novels bogged down with autobiographical details, but works of deep poetic imagination and intensity that just happen to follow the contours of autobiographical fact while charting fresh literary waters.

Presented our own lives as material, most of us will fail to separate the wheat from the chaff, if for no other reason

than because there's so much chaff and so little wheat. Yet it all looks golden.

Even greater than the risk of clutter in using autobiographical material is the risk of sentimentality, of assuming the emotional weight, authority and significance of every little aspect and event of our lives just because it happened to us.

The final problem of vestigial autobiography is the disappearing or invisible first-person narrator. Assuming this "I" to be herself, the author abdicates her responsibility to create *character*. When fiction writers write "I," they should never confuse that "I" with the person holding the pen. The "I" on paper must be created from scratch using words.

Perhaps in your own autobiographical writings you'll overcome these obstacles. But, given the odds, you would be wise to commit to either fiction or to memoir, and avoid insulting both.

Most, if not all, of a fiction writer's main problems tend to arise from a lack of faith in her material, which results from a lack of faith in the imagination.

On the other hand a writer who has a story to tell, and has confidence in that story, will tell it fearlessly and straightforwardly, without resorting to flashy gimmicks or clichés, or padding the work with autobiographical clutter, or teasing readers with false suspense, or neglecting to convey information from deep within a carefully chosen point of view, or getting stuck in the routine as opposed to reporting singular events. Most, if not all, of these problems can be limited, if not eliminated, by writing from within character(s) in situation(s)..

In the end, all six problems share one source: failure of imagination. As fiction writers, our job is to give experiences to our readers. And what you don't have yourself you can't give to others. Since we can't fully live the lives of all of our characters, we have to let our characters do it for us through the instrument of the imagination, by which we inhabit those characters and their experiences as fully, as richly, as deeply as possible.

Peter Selgin

Novelist and short-story writer Peter Selgin teaches at Gotham Writers' Workshop and is author of *By Cunning & Craft: Sound Advice and Practical Wisdom for Fiction Writers*.

