

Writing Exercises

Writing is like any other skill, it must be regularly stretched and worked to strengthen and grow. So check out these writing exercises to enhance your techniques and bolster your expertise. Only once you know the rules can you break them.

Character Development

No character is strictly good or bad, just as no person is good or bad. The best characters are multi-layered with many wants, needs, and lies they believe.

- Values are standards of behavior, the things we hold close to our hearts. Write down two conflicting values—such as security and adventure. Now write a scene where the character wants to follow both values.
- Characters, like people, have lies that they believe about themselves. Maybe the lie is “I am not worthy of being loved.” Or maybe it’s “I am not strong enough to stand up under challenges.” These lies are often solidified by a single event in the past, which Susan May Warren has termed the “Dark Moment Story.” These are often not world-changing events like the Twin Towers falling, but small events like certain heart-crushing words uttered by a bully on the play ground. Choose one lie that your character believes. Now write the scene that solidified that lie.

Writing Exercises Cont.

Setting and Description

In *Sketchy Tacos*, the setting is so important that I assigned it its own storyline. It bubbles with sensory description that helps the setting come alive. While some novels use generic cities or towns, breakout novels, like *A Separate Peace*, define their space in way that conveys specific emotion and moves the story along.

- What's the most exotic place you've been to or wish to go to? Close your eyes and picture it. Now describe the scene using all five senses.
- Now picture a common place—such as the school lunch room or gymnasium—now describe it with a certain event or feeling in mind. How would someone in love describe this space? How would someone who has just been through a break up describe it? How would a description written from a point of excitement differ from a description written from a point of gloom. If in a class or group: Have all participants describe the same space, but break them into groups of emotions or events. Write for 10 minutes then compare to see how the emotions affect the description.
- As a group, list 5-10 people/professions—for example, doctor, student, firefighter—and list 5-10 locations—these can be specific, like New York City, or more general, like desert or beach. Allow participants to mix and match people and locations randomly and then compare to see how the settings

Writing Exercises Cont.

Structure

Most writers are broken into two camps: “pantsers” who just sit down and write whatever comes to them and “plotters” who devise outlines or story maps to figure out the story before they begin. Both a pantsers and plotters need structure to keep the story moving and the reader interested.

All novels whether intentional or not, can be broken down into 3 acts. And here is the world’s fastest breakdown of the 3 Act Structure: The book opens with the inciting incident (1)–the event that pushes the main character (MC) out of his or her regular life. In Act 1, you meet the key characters and are introduced to the problem. At the end of Act 1, the MC must pass through a “Door of No Return” (2, term by James Scott Bell) which propels him or her into Act 2. Act 2 makes up the 50% or more of the book. It’s a long saga of the MC trying to make progress and repeatedly getting knocked back down. Somewhere around the halfway point, there will be a big event that will make the MC question his or her beliefs (3) and start to want to do things differently. At the end of Act 2, something will happen that will bring the MC to his or her lowest point yet (4)–all support is gone, all hope is lost. In Act 3, the MC will arm himself or herself with all the knowledge (and weapons, if it’s in the action family) he or she has gained throughout the novel to prepare for the final battle (5)–the big showdown in which the MC will break through their lie and conquer the day.

Writing Exercises Cont.

Structure (cont.)

- Take any novel. Flip through to find the book to find the 5 key events I've marked above. What those events are will vary greatly from genre to genre—the inciting incident of a romance will be way different from a thriller—but you'll find all five in some form in any book you pick up.
- Create the rough outline for a novel by determining the inciting incident, Door of No Return, midpoint event, lowest point event, and the final battle. The first four events should all build toward the final battle.