



**THE** **BREAKOUT**  
**NOVELIST**

CRAFT AND STRATEGIES FOR  
CAREER FICTION WRITERS

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## EXERCISE 1: *Adding Heroic Qualities*

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**Step 1:** Who are your personal heroes? *Write down the name of one.*

**Step 2:** What makes this person a hero or heroine to you? What is their greatest heroic quality? *Write that down.*

**Step 3:** What was the moment in time in which you first became aware of this quality in your hero/heroine? *Write that down.*

**Step 4:** Assign that quality to your protagonist. Find a way for him or her actively to demonstrate that quality, even in a small way, in his or her first scene. *Make notes, starting now.*

**Follow-up work:** Prior to the climactic sequence of your novel, find six more points at which your protagonist can demonstrate, even in a small way, some heroic quality.

**Conclusion:** So many protagonists that I meet in manuscripts start out as ordinary Joes or Janes. Most stories build toward enormous heroic actions at the end, which is fine, but what about the beginning? What is there to make me care? Often, not enough. Demonstrate special qualities right away, and you will immediately turn your protagonist into a hero or heroine, a character whose outcome matters.

## EXERCISE 2: *Opening Extra Character Dimensions*

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**Step 1:** What is your protagonist's *defining quality*—that is, how would anyone describe your protagonist? What trait is most prominent in his personality? What kind of person is she? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** Objectively speaking, what is the opposite of that quality? *Write that down.*

**Step 3:** Write a paragraph in which your protagonist actively demonstrates the *opposite* quality that you wrote down in Step 2. *Start writing now.*

**Follow-up work:** Define a *secondary character quality*; write down its opposite; write a paragraph in which this character demonstrates the *opposite* secondary quality. In the same way, open third and fourth additional dimensions to your protagonist.

**Conclusion:** As I mentioned in the introduction, the second most common reason we reject manuscripts (after low tension) is poorly developed protagonists. Now that you have opened extra dimensions to your hero, you will have an easier time building into this character a fundamental and full-blown *inner conflict*.

### EXERCISE 3: *Creating Inner Conflict*

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**Step 1:** Thinking about your protagonist in the novel as a whole, what is it that your protagonist most wants? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** Write down the opposite of that.

**Step 3:** How can your protagonist want both of those things simultaneously? What would cause him or her to want them both? What steps would he or she actively take to pursue those conflicting desires? *Make notes, starting now.*

**Follow-up work:** Work on sharpening the contrast between these opposing desires. Make them mutually exclusive. How can you ensure that if your protagonist gets one, he or she cannot get the other? *Make notes.*

**Conclusion:** In creating genuine inner conflict, it is not enough simply to create inner turmoil. True inner conflict involves wanting two things that are mutually exclusive. It is most effective when it tears your protagonist, or any character, in two opposite directions.

## EXERCISE 4: *Creating Larger-Than-Life Qualities*

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**Step 1:** Write down the following:

What is the one thing that your protagonist would never, ever say?

What is the one thing that your protagonist would never, ever do?

What is the one thing that your protagonist would never, ever *think*?

**Step 2:** Find places in your story in which your protagonist must say, do, and think those very things. What are the circumstances? What are the consequences? *Make notes, starting now.*

**Follow-up work 1:** Find twelve more points in the story in which your protagonist can break through his or her boundaries.

**Follow-up work 2:** Find a single point in the story in which your protagonist pointedly lets go of an opportunity for a larger-than-life gesture.

**Conclusion:** A larger-than-life character is one who says, does, and thinks things that we would like to but never dare. This does not necessarily mean turning your characters into wise-crackers or pulp clichés. It does mean pushing them out of their own bounds, whatever those might be.

## EXERCISE 5: *Heightening Larger-Than-Life Qualities*

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**Step 1:** At random in the middle of your manuscript, pick anything at all that your protagonist thinks, says, or does. Heighten it. Make it bigger, funnier, more shocking, more vulgar, more out of bounds, more over the top, more violent, more insightful, more wildly romantic, more active, more anything. *Make the change in your manuscript.*

**Step 2:** Take that same action, thought, or line of dialogue and make it smaller. Tone it down; understate it; make it quieter, more internal, more personal, more ironic, more offhand, less impassioned, barely noticeable. *Make the change in your manuscript.*

**Follow-up work:** Select twenty-four more points in the story where you can heighten or diminish something that your protagonist does, says, or thinks.

**Conclusion:** Larger-than-life characters powerfully attract us. Why? They are surprising, vital, and alive. They do not let life slip by. Every moment counts. Every day has meaning. How can you give that kind of life force to your protagonist? Turn up the volume on what he or she says, thinks, and does.

## EXERCISE 6: *Reversing Motives*

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**Step 1:** Pick any scene in your novel featuring your protagonist. In the scene, what is his or her main action? What is he or she trying to accomplish, obtain, or avoid? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** Write a complete list of the reasons why your protagonist is doing what he or she is doing. *Write down as many of these motives as you can.* Do not look at the next step until you are done.

**Step 3:** Circle the last reason on your list, the last thing that you wrote down.

**Step 4:** Rewrite the opening of the scene, only this time send your protagonist into action (or avoidance) foremost and primarily for the reason you circled. *Start writing now.*

**Follow-up work:** Reverse motives in six other scenes.

**Conclusion:** You may wind up retaining the original motivations in many scenes in your novel, but it is likely that some of them will more engaging after a motive reversal.

## EXERCISE 7: *Defining Personal Stakes*

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**Step 1:** Write down the name of your protagonist.

**Step 2:** What is his or her main problem, conflict, goal, need, desire, yearning, or whatever it is driving him or her through the story? *Write that down.*

**Step 3:** What could make this problem matter more? Write down as many new reasons as you can think of. *Start writing now.*

**Step 4:** When you run out of reasons, what could make this problem matter even more than that? *Write down even more reasons.*

**Step 5:** When you run out of steam, what could make this problem matter more than life itself? *Write down still more reasons.*

**Follow-up work:** For all the ways to deepen the personal stakes that you created above, work out how to incorporate each into your novel. Include at least six. *Makes notes now.*

**Conclusion:** Every protagonist has a primary motive for doing what he or she must do. It would not be much of a story without that. Outward motives are easy to devise from plot circumstances, but inner motives most powerfully drive a character forward. Don't just look at all the possibilities here. *Use all of them.* That is exactly what raising personal stakes is all about. It is extra work, for sure, but the result will be a more gripping novel.



## **EXERCISE 8: *Capturing the Moment of Irrevocable Commitment***

**Step 1:** Identify the moment in your story when your protagonist's stakes hit home—when he or she realizes that there is no turning back. This is the moment of irrevocable commitment.

**Step 2:** Write out that moment in one paragraph. *Start writing now.*

**Step 3:** Look at the paragraph you have written. Notice its shape, feel its effect. *Now imagine that this is the first paragraph of your novel.*

**Follow-up work:** The moment of commitment that you created above has an opposite: a moment of irresolution, a healthy aversion, justified selfishness, or something similar. *Write that down.* Now find a place earlier in your manuscript to slot this in. *Make the change in your manuscript now.*

**Conclusion:** You may not wind up directly using the paragraphs you create with this exercise; however, let your protagonist's inner commitment infuse and underlie all his actions. Let her be driven. When resolve weakens, reinforce it. Strong commitment on the part of your protagonist will generate strong commitment on the part of your readers. The same is true, not surprisingly, when you create strong commitment on the part of your antagonist.

## EXERCISE 9: *Deepening Exposition*

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**Step 1:** In your manuscript, pick a moment in which a point-of-view character does not react to what is happening, or when in fact nothing is happening and the action of the story is paused or static.

**Step 2:** Write a paragraph of exposition delineating this character's self-conscious thoughts about his or her own state of mind, emotional condition, state of being or soul, or his or her perception of the state of the world at this point in time. *Start writing now.*

**Follow-up work:** Repeat the above steps at four more points of deep exposition (a passage in which we experience a character's thoughts and feelings).

**Conclusion:** Passages of exposition can be among the most gripping in your novel. Indeed, they had better be, since nothing is "happening." When nothing overtly is going on, make sure that a great deal is at work beneath the surface. Otherwise, your novel will have dead spots that your readers will skip.

## EXERCISE 10: *Secondary Character Development*

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**Step 1:** Pick a secondary character who aids your protagonist. *Write down the name of that character.*

**Step 2:** Create an extra dimension: Write down this character's defining quality. Write down the opposite of that. Now create a paragraph in which this character demonstrates the opposite quality that you have identified. *Start writing now.*

**Step 3:** Create an inner conflict: Write down what this character most wants. Write down the opposite of that. How can this character want both things simultaneously? How can they be mutually exclusive? *Make notes, starting now.*

**Step 4:** Create larger-than-life qualities: Write down things that this character would never say, do, or think. Find places where this character can and must say, do, and think those things. *Makes notes, starting now.*

**Step 5:** Define this character's personal stakes: What is his or her main problem, conflict, or goal? Write down what would make this problem matter more, and then matter more than life itself. *Make notes, starting now.*

**Follow-up work:** Follow the steps above for a different minor character who supports your protagonist.

**Conclusion:** You may wonder whether highly developed secondary characters will overwhelm your protagonist and take over the story. Don't worry. If your secondary folks occupy less page time and do not enact the novel's most significant events, they will add luster to the novel but not blind your readers to your story's true hero or heroine.

## EXERCISE 11: *Developing the Antagonist*

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**Step 1:** Who is the antagonist in your story? *Write down the name of that character.*

**Step 2:** Create an extra dimension: Write down your antagonist's defining quality. Write down the opposite of that. Now create a paragraph in which your antagonist demonstrates the opposite quality that you have identified. *Start writing now.*

**Step 3:** Create an inner conflict: Write down what your antagonist most wants. Write down the opposite of that. How can this character want both things simultaneously? How can they be mutually exclusive? *Make notes, starting now.*

**Step 4:** Create larger-than-life qualities: Write down things that your antagonist would never say, do, or think. Find places where this character can and must say, do, and think those things. *Makes notes, starting now.*

**Step 5:** Define your antagonist's personal stakes: What is his or her main problem, conflict, or goal? Next, write down what would make this problem matter more, and then matter more than life itself. *Make notes, starting now.*

**Follow-up work:** Follow the steps above for a secondary character who supports your villain.

**Conclusion:** No one is bad all the time. Villains are people, too. Rather than build a villain who is unlike you, use this exercise to build one who resembles you. That might be the most chilling villain of all.

## EXERCISE 12: *Combining Roles*

**Step 1:** In two columns, list the following: (1) the names of all major, secondary, and minor characters, and (2) the purpose of each in the story. (Jot down their purposes in as few words as possible; for example, *supports the protagonist*, *supports the antagonist*, *provides special knowledge*, etc.)

<i>Characters:</i>	<i>Purpose in story:</i>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

**Step 2:** If you have ten or fewer characters, cross out the name of one. *Delete him or her from the story*. Yes, do it. If you have more than ten characters, cross out the names of two. Go ahead. It's just an exercise.

**Step 3:** Your cast list is now shorter by one or two, but there remain one or two functions to be served in the story. *Assign those functions to one or more of the remaining characters*.

**Follow-up work:** Are there other characters in your cast who can take on multiple roles? Go down the list and note the possibilities, then put them into practice. Find at least two more roles to combine into one.

**Conclusion:** Were you able to complete this exercise? Some authors have great difficulty with it. Most, though, find that the number of characters in their cast can be reduced. Furthermore, the remaining characters get more interesting. Why? Not only because they have more to do, but because they have become characters who are capable of more.

### EXERCISE 13: *Raising Public Stakes*

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**Step 1:** As briefly as possible, *write down your novel's overt and outward central conflict or problem.*

**Step 2:** What would make this problem worse? Write down as many reasons as you can. *Start writing now.*

**Step 3:** When you have run out of ideas, ask: What would make this problem even worse than that? *Write down still more reasons.*

**Step 4:** When you have run out of steam, ask: What are the circumstances under which my protagonist(s) would actually fail to solve the problem? *Write those down.*

**Step 5:** Have your novel conclude with your protagonist's failure. Can you pull some measure of happiness from this ending? *Make notes.*

**Follow-up work:** Incorporate into your story four raisings of the outward (plot) stakes. *Make notes for revision.*

**Conclusion:** A common failure in novels is that we can see the ending coming. The author signals his preferred outcome, and guess what? That is how things turn out. The only way to keep an ending in doubt is to make failure possible. Even better is to make failure happen. Maybe what's actually at stake isn't what you thought at all.

## EXERCISE 14: *Making Complications Active*

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**Step 1:** What is your novel's main conflict? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** What are the main complications that deepen that conflict? (This list should have gotten longer in the last exercise.) *Write those down.*

**Step 3:** To each complication, assign the name of the character who primarily will enact it. How will they do so? *Make notes, starting now.*

**Step 4:** Work out the primary motives for each character who introduces a complication, list all secondary motives, and underline the last one you wrote down. *Pick a scene involving that character, and reverse that character's motives.*

**Follow-up work:** For at least three complications, work out who will be hurt the most when it happens. *Incorporate that damage into the story.*

**Conclusion:** Most authors underutilize their secondary characters. Here is a way to get more mileage out of your cast.

## EXERCISE 15: *Building Plot Layers*

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**Step 1:** What is the name of your protagonist? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** What is the overall problem he must solve? *Write those down.*

**Step 3:** What additional problems can he face? Not complications to the main problem (we dealt with those in the last exercise) but altogether different problems? *Write those down.*

**Follow-up work:** For each plot layer that you have added, or at least two, work out at least four steps or scenes that you will need to bring this narrative line to its climax and resolution. *Makes notes for these additional steps or scenes.*

**Conclusion:** Have you ever noticed how everything seems to happen at once? *Good things come in threes. When it rains, it pours.* It is layers that give a novel the rich texture of real life. Building them into your novel is extra work, but the reward is a rich resonance and complexity.



## EXERCISE 16: *Weaving Plot Layers Together*

**Step 1:** On a single sheet of paper, make three columns. In the first column, list your novel's major and secondary characters. In the middle column, list the principal narrative lines: main problem, extra plot layers, subplots, minor narrative threads, questions to be answered in the course of the story, etc. In the right-hand column, list the novel's principal places.

<i>Characters</i>	<i>Narrative Lines</i>	<i>Settings</i>
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.

**Step 2:** With circles and lines, connect a character, a narrative line, and a place. Keep drawing lines and circles at random, making connections. See what develops. When a random connection suddenly makes sense, *make notes*.

**Follow-up work:** Add to your novel at least six of the nodes of conjunction that you came up with.

**Conclusion:** Three hundred pages in, a manuscript can feel out of control. The elements can swim together in a sea of confusion. This panic is normal. Your novel will come out okay. Trust the process. If you have set a strong central problem, added layers, and found ways to weave them together, then the whole will hang together pretty well.

## EXERCISE 17: *Adding Subplots*

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**Step 1:** Who are your novel's most important secondary characters? *Write down the names of one, two, or three.*

**Step 2:** What is the main problem, conflict, or goal faced by each of these characters? *Write those down.*

**Step 3:** For each problem, what are three main steps leading to the solution to that problem, the resolution of that conflict, or the attainment of that goal? Another way to ask that is: What are three actions, events, or developments, with respect to these secondary characters, that you could not possibly leave out? *Write those down.*

**Step 4:** Outline each secondary character's story. While your protagonist is at work on the main problem, what is each character doing to solve his or her own problem? *Make notes, starting now.*

**Follow-up work:** If you are writing a first-person novel, decide how you can nevertheless work in your subplots and their steps. *Make notes, starting now.*

**Conclusion:** Can subplots and secondary characters steal the show? Of course. If they steal it effectively enough, it is just possible that you have the wrong protagonist. But that would be unusual. Most subplots are underdeveloped or nonexistent. This exercise can help give subplots a vital pulse.

## EXERCISE 18: *The Antagonist's Outline*

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**Step 1:** What is your antagonist's main problem, conflict, or goal? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** What does your antagonist most want? *Write that down.*

**Step 3:** What is the second plot layer for your antagonist? *Write that down.*

**Step 4:** What are the five most important steps toward your antagonist's goal, or toward resolving his or her central problem or conflict? A different way to ask that is: What are the five events, actions, or high points, with respect to your antagonist, that you could not possibly leave out? *Write those down.*

**Step 5:** What are the three most important steps toward, or away from, your antagonist's greatest need? *Write those down.*

**Step 6:** Using the material from the above steps, *outline the entire novel from the antagonist's point of view.*

**Follow-up work:** Find five new ways in which your antagonist can advance his or her own interests. Let these be actions that have nothing to do with your hero, stuff that your villain would do anyway. *Note them down.*

**Conclusion:** We are not accustomed to thinking of villains as being on an inner journey, but what human being is not? Humanize your villain. Motivate his actions with kindness. Let her be heroic, helpful, and principled. Hannah Ardent wrote of the "banality of evil." For fiction writers, that means creating not passionless cruelty, but evil that wears a compassionate face.

## EXERCISE 19: *Heightening Turning Points*

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**Step 1:** Pick a turning point in your story. It can be a major change of direction in the plot or a small discovery in the course of a scene.

**Step 2:** *Heighten it.* Change the setting in some way. Make the action bigger. Magnify the dialogue. Make the inner change experienced by your point-of-view character as cataclysmic as an earthquake.

**Step 3:** *Take the same moment and underplay it.* Make it quieter. Take away action. Remove dialogue. Make the transition small and internal, a tide just beginning to ebb.

**Follow-up work:** Go through your novel and find the turning points in twenty scenes. *Find ways to heighten (or pointedly diminish) them.*

**Conclusion:** Most manuscripts I read do not feel dynamic. Their stories do not stride forward in pronounced steps. Many authors are afraid of exaggerating what is happening, or of appearing arty. That is a mistake. Stories, like life, are about change. Delineating the changes scene by scene gives a novel a sense of unfolding drama and its characters a feeling of progress over time.

## EXERCISE 20: *Inner Turning Points*

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**Step 1:** Choose any turning point in your story other than the climax. Who is the point-of-view character?

**Step 2:** Wind the clock back ten minutes. How does this character feel about himself or herself at this earlier moment?

**Step 3:** Write a paragraph in which you delineate this character's state of mind or state of being at this earlier moment. *Start writing now.*

**Step 4:** Now write a paragraph in which you delineate this character's state of mind or state of being ten minutes *after* the turning point. *Start writing now.*

**Step 5:** Use the material you generated in the steps above to pull together a single paragraph detailing this character's inner transition at this moment. As a starting point, try this framework:

Ten minutes before, he had been \_\_\_\_\_. But now everything was different.

Now he was \_\_\_\_\_.

**Follow-up work:** Find six more inner turning points to delineate in your novel, and repeat the steps above for each.

**Conclusion:** Most fiction writers carefully research such story elements as their novel's settings, their characters' professions, and whatever else makes the world of their novel real. However, few fiction writers do *emotional research*—that is, finding out how real life human beings think and feel in the circumstances that occur in the novel. Is your hero shot at? How does that really feel? Ask a cop. Does your heroine have a makeover? Do its effects last? Interview a makeover artist. What does it feel like to be a child? Find out from a five-year-old. Psychology texts are useful, but real experience is best.

## EXERCISE 21: *Creating High Moments*

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**Step 1:** In your novel, is there one character who can be forgiven by another? What is being forgiven? When? Why? *Write out the passage in which that happens.*

**Step 2:** In your novel, is there a character who can sacrifice himself or herself in some way, or something dearly loved? Who is it? What do they sacrifice? *Note it down.*

**Step 3:** In your novel, is there a character who can change direction? Who is it? What causes the turnabout? When does it happen? *Note it down.*

**Step 4:** In your novel, is there a character who faces a moral choice? Who? What choice? How can that choice become more difficult? *Make notes.*

**Step 5:** In your novel, is there a character who we do not expect to die, who can nevertheless perish? *Kill that character.*

**Follow-up work:** Using the notes you made above, *incorporate each of those high moments into your novel.*

**Conclusion:** For a novel to feel big, big things must happen: irrevocable changes, hearts opening, hearts breaking, saying farewell to one well loved whom we will never meet again. Create these moments. Use them. They are the high moments that make a novel highly dramatic.

## EXERCISE 22: *Bridging Conflict*

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**Step 1:** Does your novel include a prologue that does not involve your protagonist, or one or more opening chapters in which your hero or heroine does not appear? *Move your hero or heroine's first scene to page one.* Yes, really do it. See how it feels.

**Step 2:** Once your protagonist arrives on stage, what business do you feel must be included before the first big change, conflict, problem, or plot development arrives? *Write down those steps.*

**Step 3:** What is the bridging conflict that carries us through those opening steps to the first big change, conflict, problem, or plot development? *Write it down.*

**Step 4:** Open your manuscript to page one. How can you make that bridging conflict stronger at this point? *Make a change that makes the conflict more immediate and palpable.*

**Step 5:** Turn to page two. *Repeat the previous step. Continue until you reach the first big change, conflict, problem, or plot development.*

**Follow-up work:** Find four places in your novel that fall between plot developments or scenes in which the problem does not immediately arrive. *Add bridging conflict.*

**Conclusion:** To maintain high tension, it isn't necessary to keep your novel's central conflict squarely front and center. Bridging conflicts add contrast and variety, and make even peripheral action matter. It is what keeps your readers' eyes glued always to the page, even when your main plot is taking a break.

### EXERCISE 23: *Low Tension Fix #1—Dramatic Settings*

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**Step 1:** Find any scene in your novel that is set in a kitchen, living room, or office, or in a car that your hero is driving from one scene to another. *Look especially in the first fifty pages.*

**Step 2:** Change the setting. *Make it more dramatic.*

**Follow-up work:** Find a scene that involves your hero taking a shower or bath, drinking tea or coffee, smoking a cigarette, or reviewing prior action. *Cut the scene.*

**Conclusion:** This exercise usually provokes anxiety in workshop participants. *But I need that tea scene!* is a typical cry. *It's how you find out what my heroine is feeling!* Maybe. The fact is, again and again in reading manuscripts, my eyes jump over such material. It is so easy to lapse into review: mere churning of what already has happened. Another trap is telling us how your hero reaches a decision. Why bother? Instead, show us what happens as a result. Scenes involving tea, coffee, showers, baths, and cigarettes are by nature inactive. Cut them. Yes, really cut them. You think you need them, but almost certainly you don't. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they drag a novel down.



**EXERCISE 24: *Low Tension Fix #2—Delaying Backstory***

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**Step 1:** In the first fifty pages of your novel, find any scene that establishes the setting, brings the players to the stage, sets up the situation, or is backstory.

**Step 2:** *Put brackets around this material, or highlight it in your electronic file.*

**Step 3:** *Cut and paste this material into Chapter 15. Yes, Chapter 15.*

**Follow-up work:** Look at Chapter 15 ... does the backstory belong here? If not, can it be cut outright? If that is not possible, where is the best place for it to reside *after the mid-point of your novel?*

**Conclusion:** Backstory is less important than most novelists think. If you must include it at all, locate it so that it provides a long-sought explanation.

**EXERCISE 25: *Low Tension Fix #3—Tension on Every Page***

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**Step 1:** Turn to any page in your manuscript at random. Put your finger on any line at random.

**Step 2:** Find a way to add tension at this moment. If there is already tension, skip to the next line and heighten the tension there.

**Follow-up work 1:** Pick another page at random, then pick another line. Heighten the tension at *this* point.

**Follow-up work 2:** Pick at random a third page and a third line. Heighten the tension at *this* point, too.

**Follow-up work 3:** Go through all the pages of your novel in random order and raise the tension on each one.

**Conclusion:** How easy is it to heighten tension on every page of your manuscript? Remember, though, that tension is what keeps the pages turning. It causes us to slow down, look carefully, and find out how things will come out. Leave it out, and what do readers have to wonder about?

**EXERCISE 26: First Line Deconstruction**

**Step 1:** For each of the following first lines, rate on a scale of 1–5 the degree to which it makes you want to read the *next* line. *In each case, note down why—or why not.*

1. I searched for sleep curled up in my quilt—the one made for me at my birth by my paternal grandmother’s own hands.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

2. If half of all marriages end in divorce, how long does the average marriage last?

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

3. Mike always teased me about my memory, about how I could go back years and years to what people were wearing on a given occasion, right down to their jewelry or shoes.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

4. When my father finally died, he left the Redskins tickets to my brother, the house on Shepard Street to my sister, and the house on the Vineyard to me.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

5. When the lights went off, the accompanist kissed her.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

6. Upon waking this cold, gray morning from a troubled sleep, I realized for the hundredth time, but this time with deep conviction, that my words and behavior towards you were disrespectful, and rude and selfish as well.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

7. Tal stretched out his hand and pulled himself up onto the next out-thrust spike of the Tower.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

8. I was never so frightened as I am now.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

9. Watch your step.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

10. In the fleeting seconds of final memory, the image that will become Burma is the sun and a woman’s parasol.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

11. Through my binoculars, I could see this nice forty-something-foot cabin cruiser anchored a few hundred yards offshore.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

12. He plunked two ice cubes into the glass and submerged them with Johnny Walker Black.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- (1) *Sullivan's Island* by Dorothea Benton Frank
- (2) *The Saving Graces* by Patricia Gaffney
- (3) *The Dive from Clausen's Pier* by Ann Packer
- (4) *The Emperor of Ocean Park* by Stephen L. Carter
- (5) *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett
- (6) *Cloudsplitter* by Russell Banks
- (7) *The Seventh Tower: The Fall* by Garth Nix
- (8) *Affinity* by Sarah Waters
- (9) *The Crimson Petal and the White* by Michel Faber
- (10) *The Piano Tuner* by Daniel Mason
- (11) *Plum Island* by Nelson DeMille
- (12) *Jitter Joint* by Howard Swindle

**Follow-up work:** What is the intrigue factor in your opening line? Can you say? Do others agree? *If not, choose a new opening line.*

**Conclusion:** Try this at your next critique group session or chapter meeting of your writers' organization: Ask everyone to bring in two opening lines: their favorite of all time, and the first line from their current manuscript. Mix them up in a hat. Read them aloud and ask people to raise their hands if they want to hear the next line. I promise you, you will see the intrigue factor at work again and again—or not!

## EXERCISE 27: *Freezing Moments in Time*

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**Step 1:** Find in your novel a moment of transition, a pause, a moment of character definition or testing, a place where the action can be momentarily frozen, or the prelude to (or the aftermath of) an important plot event.

**Step 2:** What are three things that make this minute in time different from any other minute in time? *Write those down.*

**Step 3:** What are three things that make this place uniquely different from any other place? *Write those down.*

**Step 4:** What are three things that define the social world of the story at this precise moment? *Write those down.*

**Step 5:** Use the details generated in any of the steps above to craft a paragraph that freezes for readers how the world looks and feels to your point-of-view character at this moment. Pin down the unique feeling of this time, this place, or this social world. *Start writing now.*

**Follow-up work:** Choose four other moments in time to freeze.

**Conclusion:** Here is where to apply your powers of observation. You notice things, don't you? You get the world's ironies, appreciate its wonders, and pick up details that others miss, right? Of course you do. You are a writer. Okay, now is the time to use those gifts. Give your protagonist the same awareness of the world that you have, or maybe one that is keener. His or her observations of time, place, and society will further reveal, delineate, and define this character. How we look at the world is as distinctive as the fingerprints we leave on a drinking glass. Make sure that your protagonist has a distinctive take on things, too. He or she will spring alive in new ways for your readers.

## EXERCISE 28: *Measuring Change*

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**Step 1:** Find a moment in your manuscript when your hero is speaking with a major secondary character, or when that secondary character carries the point of view while speaking with your hero.

**Step 2:** Create a paragraph in which your hero takes the measure of this other character—that is, delineates for himself or herself this other character’s qualities, mood, or situation in life. Put simply, how does your hero see this character right now? *Start writing now.*

Alternately, have your point-of-view character regard your hero by the same criteria. How does he or she view your hero at this particular moment? *Start writing now.*

**Step 3:** Move forward to a later point in the story when these two characters are again together on the page. Repeat Step 2. How does your hero view this character now?

Alternately, how does that character view your protagonist at this point? *Start writing now.*

**Follow-up work:** Find three points in the story in which to delineate your antagonist’s view of your protagonist. *Write a paragraph for each.*

**Conclusion:** Allowing characters the occasional moment to take stock of each other is a powerful way to mark each player’s progress through the story. How have events affected each? Possibly one character sees your hero carrying a load of cares, while another imagines that he or she has never looked so alive. Examine your hero from several points of view; later show us how those views have shifted.

## EXERCISE 29: *The Psychology of Place*

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**Step 1:** Pick a high moment, turning point, or climax involving your protagonist. Where is it set?

**Step 2:** Write a paragraph describing how this place makes your character feel, or how your protagonist feels about this place. *Start writing now.*

**Step 3:** Move forward one week in time or backward one week in time. Return your protagonist to this place. Write a paragraph describing how it makes your character feel *now*, or how your character feels about it *now*. *Start writing now.*

**Follow-up work:** What is the setting that recurs most often in your novel? From whose point of view is it most often seen? Count the number of times that character is in that place. *Write a list, and for each return to that place, find one way in which that character's perception of it changes.*

**Conclusion:** Bringing to life the world of your novel is more than just describing it using the five senses. A place lives most vividly through the eyes of characters. The unique way in which each one sees what is around them is how the setting itself becomes a character in the story. Think about it: By itself, landscape is unchanging. (Well, mostly.) It takes a person to perceive its differences over time. Delineate those evolving perceptions, and the world of your novel will feel rich, dynamic, and alive.

### EXERCISE 30: *Strengthening Point of View*

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**Step 1:** Open your manuscript at random. Through whose point of view are we experiencing this scene? *Write down that character's name.*

**Step 2:** On this page of the manuscript, select anything that the point-of-view character says, does, or thinks. *Heighten it.* Change the dialogue. Exaggerate the action. Grow the emotion, thought, or observation to make it even more characteristic of this character.

**Follow-up work:** Turn to another page at random. Whose point of view is it now? *Repeat the steps above once in every scene in your novel.*

**Conclusion:** What would happen if you actually did the follow-up exercise above, instead of just thinking about it? Your novel would take longer to write, for sure, but wouldn't it be stronger? When I pose this question in the workshops, there are groans, but also nods of agreement. Weak point of view is a common failing of manuscripts; the cure is painstaking, page by page strengthening of point of view. Good news: The next exercise is a tool that might make the job easier.



**EXERCISE 31: Character Delineation**

**Step 1:** In the following chart, the columns A, B, and C are for different point-of-view characters in your story. (You can add more columns.) For each character, work down the list of common words on the left and *write in the word that character A, B, or C would use instead.*

Auto			
Soda			
Coffee			
Alcohol			
Cash			
“Hello!”			
(Expletive)			
“Cool.”			
“Oh well.”			
God			
Mother			
Father			
Partner/Spouse			
Man			
Woman			
Attractive			
Unattractive			
Music			
Periodical			

**Follow-up work:** For each point-of-view character, list unique gestures, rationalizations, ways of procrastination, peeves, hot buttons, sentimental triggers, principles to live by, superstitions, or anything else that bears upon the way this character speaks or thinks. *Use them in writing from their point of view.*

**Conclusion:** Have you ever read a novel in which all the characters talk alike and seem alike? That is weak point-of-view writing. Strong point of view is more than just

the words a character uses. It is his or her whole way of feeling, thinking, speaking, acting, and believing. Each will feed into the point of view. One character's cadence and sentence structures will be different from another's. So will their words, so will their thoughts, so will their actions and reactions. Make your characters different from each other, just as people in life are. That way, your novel will have the variety and resonance of real life, too.

## EXERCISE 32: *Discovering Theme I*

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**Step 1:** With respect to the story as a whole, what does your protagonist want? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** If your protagonist cannot get that, what would he or she take second? *Write that down.*

**Step 3:** If he or she can get nothing else, what would he or she settle for? *Write that down.*

**Step 4:** Work out alternate endings for the novel based on each of the above answers. How would each ending go? *Make notes.*

**Follow-up work:** Again thinking of the story as a whole, what outcome would be more than your protagonist possibly could hope for?

**Conclusion:** Ah! The answer to that last question may open up even more possible outcomes for the story. Could it be that your protagonist (or you) has his or her sights set too low? Even if that dream outcome is not practical, how can that vision of greater good get incorporated into the story?

### EXERCISE 33: *Discovering Theme II*

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**Step 1:** Thinking about the story as a whole, what is the main problem facing your protagonist? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** What is the bigger problem beyond that? *Write down your answer.*

**Step 3:** What is the problem that your protagonist cannot solve? *Write that down, too.*

**Step 4:** Find ways to introduce into the story the bigger problem and the problem that cannot be solved. How can that be accomplished? *Make notes.*

**Conclusion:** Every issue conceals a bigger issue. At the heart of every big issue is a dilemma that has no answer. While it may sound downbeat to introduce these elements into your story, in fact they will amplify the problem at hand. The ripples that they send outward in your readers' minds are, in essence, your novel's deepest issues or, to put it another way, its theme at work.

### EXERCISE 34: *Discovering Theme III*

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**Step 1:** What is the main problem in the novel? *Write that down.*

**Step 2:** Who else in the story besides your protagonist could have that problem? How would it manifest differently for these other characters? *Write down your answers.*

**Step 3:** Incorporate the results of Step 2 into the story. *Make notes.*

**Follow-up work:** Who in your story could have the *opposite* problem? *Incorporate that into your novel.*

**Conclusion:** Just as the main problem will strengthen your theme, it is also no problem to run counter to it. Does your hero rescue his family from the wilderness, struggling against nature? What about the hermit who helps them? He lives at peace with nature, yes? His struggle may be the opposite: to connect again with his fellow man.

**EXERCISE 35: *Discovering Theme IV***

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**Step 1:** What does your antagonist believe in? Why does he or she feel justified and right? How would the world be better if things ran the way he or she would like them to run? *Write down your answers.*

**Step 2:** Make the antagonist's case stronger. Assume that the antagonist actually is correct: What support for the antagonist's case can be found in philosophy or religion? On a practical level, how would things really be better? *Explain it in writing.*

**Step 3:** Choose a character who supports your antagonist, and make the antagonist's case from that character's point of view. *Write a paragraph, starting now.*

**Follow-up work:** Find the moment in your story when your protagonist realizes that your antagonist is right, and why. *Write out that moment in a paragraph, starting now.*

**Conclusion:** Certainly you want your protagonist to doubt himself at times, don't you? Why not push that all the way and let your hero doubt himself in the extreme? What would be the circumstances? How close to failure does your protagonist come? In that moment, you will be very close to your core values and theme.

### EXERCISE 36: *Creating Symbols*

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**Step 1:** What is one prominent object, event, or action that appears in your novel? *Write it down.*

**Step 2:** How can that object, event, or action recur at your novel's end? *Write that down.*

**Step 3:** Find three other places where this object, event, or action can recur in the course of the story. *Add them to your manuscript.*

**Follow-up work:** What is the opposite of that object, event, or action? Find a place for that to appear or occur, too. *Make notes.*

**Conclusion:** Sometimes called the *objective correlative*, symbols can be overly obvious, but when cleverly chosen and tactically deployed, they can punctuate a story in powerful ways.