



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

CRAFT AND STRATEGIES FOR  
CAREER FICTION WRITERS

DONALD MAASS

### **EXERCISE 37: *Finding a Protagonist's Strength***

---

**Step 1:** Is your protagonist an ordinary person? Find in him or her some kind of strength.

**Step 2:** Work out a way for that strength to be demonstrated within your protagonist's first five pages.

**Step 3:** Revise your character's introduction to your readers.

**Conclusion:** Without a quality of strength on display, your readers will not bond with your protagonist. Why should they? No one wants to spend four minutes, let alone four hundred pages, with a miserable excuse for a human being, or even a plain old average Joe. So, what is strength? It can be as simple as caring about someone, self-awareness, a longing for change, or hope. Any small, positive quality will signal to your reader, that your ordinary protagonist is worth their time.

### EXERCISE 38: *Finding a Hero's Flaws*

---

**Step 1:** Is your protagonist a hero—that is, someone who is already strong? Find in him or her something conflicted, fallible, humbling, or human.

**Step 2:** Work out a way for that flaw to be demonstrated within your protagonist's first five pages.

**Step 3:** Revise your character's introduction to your readers. *Be sure to soften the flaw with self-awareness or self-deprecating humor.*

**Conclusion:** Heroes who are nothing but good, noble, unswerving, honest, courageous, and kind to their mothers will make your readers want to gag. To make them real enough to be likeable, it's necessary to make them a little bit flawed. What is a flaw that will not also prove fatal? A personal problem, a bad habit, a hot button, a blind spot, or anything that makes your hero a real human being will work; however, it is important that this flaw not be overwhelming. That is the reason for adding wise self-awareness or a rueful sense of humor.

### EXERCISE 39: *The Impact of Greatness*

---

**Step 1:** Does your story have a character who is supposed to be great? Choose a character (your protagonist or another) who is, has been, or will be affected by that great character.

**Step 2:** Note the impact on your point-of-view character. In what ways is he or she changed by the great character? How, specifically, is his or her self-regard or actual life different? Is destiny involved? Detail the effect.

**Step 3:** Write out that impact in a paragraph. It can be backward looking (a *flashback frame*) or a present moment of exposition.

**Step 4:** Add that paragraph to your manuscript.

**Conclusion:** Greatness is not always about esteem. Those affected by great people may be ambivalent. Whatever the case in your story, see if you can shade the effect of your great character to make it specific and capture nuances. The effect of one character upon another is as particular as the characters themselves.

## EXERCISE 40: *Creating Special Characters*

---

**Step 1:** Look at a character who has a notable relationship with the protagonist through the eyes of your protagonist. List three ways in which they are exactly alike. Find one way in which they are exactly the opposite.

**Step 2:** Write down what most fascinates your protagonist about this special character. Also note one thing about the special character that your protagonist will never understand.

**Step 3:** Create the defining moment in their relationship. Write down specific details of the place, the time, the action, and their dialogue during this event. What single detail does, or will, your protagonist remember best? What detail does he or she most want to forget?

**Step 4:** At the end of your story, in what way has this special character most changed your protagonist? At the story's outset, in what way does your protagonist most resist this special character?

**Step 5:** Incorporate the above into your manuscript.

**Conclusion:** Specialness comes not from a character, but from his or her impact. Hence the somewhat paradoxical focus on your protagonist. What are the details that measure the impact on him or her? How specific can you make them? The steps above are just a start. Build your own checklist. Whether for femmes fatale or any other characters, it is those details that will bring their specialness alive.

### EXERCISE 41: *Making Ordinary Characters Extraordinary*

---

**Step 1:** Choose a character who seems ordinary. How is he or she identified or defined? A friend? A teacher? A cop? Write down five stereotypes attached to such a type. Find one way in which this character is the opposite of that.

**Step 2:** Find one way in which this character is inwardly conflicted. How strong can you make this conflict? Make it impossible to reconcile. Create a story event in which we will see this conflict enacted.

**Step 3:** If this character is meant to be eccentric, push his or her eccentricity to an extreme. What is one common thing this character does in a completely uncommon way? What is the most outrageous thing this character can do or say? How does he or she look at things in a way that is peculiar or bizarre? Write a passage in which this character explains his or her unique habits and outlook. Make it so logical and convincing that anyone would agree.

**Conclusion:** Secondary characters often do not stand out. Giving them the qualities that make them memorable involves violating our expectations, making them deeply human, and pushing boundaries. Some authors worry about overshadowing their protagonists or creating cartoon characters. In truth, the problem in most manuscripts is that secondary characters are too tame.

## EXERCISE 42: *Empowering Antagonists*

---

**Step 1:** Find five ways and times at which your antagonist will directly engage your protagonist.

**Step 2:** Write out your antagonist's opinion of your protagonist. What does your antagonist *like* about your protagonist? How does your antagonist want to *help* your protagonist? What advice has your antagonist got that could help the protagonist?

**Step 3:** How can your antagonist be summarized or defined? A boss? A senator? A mother-in-law? List five stereotypes associated with such a type. Find one way in which your antagonist is exactly the opposite.

**Step 4:** Create four actions that will make your antagonist sympathetic.

**Step 5:** Assume that your antagonist is justified and right. Make his or her case in writing. Find times in history when things ran his or her way and were good. Find a passage from theology, philosophy, or folk wisdom that supports your antagonist's outlook. Choose one character whom your antagonist will win over. In what way does your protagonist agree with your antagonist?

**Conclusion:** Cardboard villains don't scare us. Stereotypical antagonists lack teeth. By contrast, an antagonist who is human, understandable, justified, and even right will stir in your readers the maximum unease. In creating antagonists, reject the idea of evil. Make them good. Make them active. Bring them on stage and into your protagonist's face. An antagonist who merely lurks isn't doing much for your story.

### EXERCISE 43: *Inner and Outer Turning Points*

---

**Step 1:** Pick a scene. Identify its outer turning point, the exact minute when things change for your protagonist or point-of-view character.

**Step 2:** Wind the clock back ten minutes. Write a paragraph saying how your protagonist or point-of-view character sees himself or herself at this moment.

**Step 3:** Wind the clock ten minutes beyond the outer turning point. Write a paragraph saying how your protagonist or point-of-view character sees himself or herself at this moment.

**Step 4:** Note three visible and/or audible details of the turning point in Step 1. Make one an oblique detail, that is, something that would only be noticed upon a close look or a replay of the tape.

**Step 5:** Combine the results of Steps 2, 3, and 4 into a passage in which you delineate and detail your protagonist or point-of-view character's inner turning point.

**Conclusion:** Have you ever changed in a moment—as when, say, shattering news came via telephone? At such a moment, you realize that your life will never be the same. But if we are observing you from outside, how would we know? We wouldn't. An inner turning point can only be captured by going inside to detail the nuances of the change.



## EXERCISE 44: *Stripping Down Dialogue*

---

**Step 1:** From your manuscript, pick any two-character passage of dialogue. Choose an exchange that is a page or so in length.

**Step 2:** Strip out any attributives (*he said, she said*) and any incidental action.

**Step 3:** Rewrite this dialogue entirely as an exchange of insults.

**Step 4:** Rewrite this dialogue as a rapid-fire exchange of lines that are a maximum of one to five words.

**Step 5:** Rewrite this dialogue as an exchange in which one character speaks only once and the other character responds with a nonverbal gesture (say, an eloquent shrug).

**Step 6:** Without referring to your original version, rewrite this dialogue incorporating the best of the results from the above steps.

**Conclusion:** In reconstructing the passage, do you notice the dialogue itself getting tighter? Are you using fewer attributives? Are you cutting incidental action that chokes up the passage? Good. It is the spoken words that give dialogue its punch. Everything else gets in the way.

## EXERCISE 45: *Setting Goals and Set Backs*

---

**Step 1:** Choose a scene from your novel. Write down what it is in this scene that your protagonist or point-of-view character wants.

**Step 2:** Create three hints in this scene that your protagonist or point-of-view character will get what he or she wants. Also, build three reasons to believe that he or she *won't* get what they want.

**Step 3:** Write passages that weave in these hints. In rewriting the scene in the next exercise, incorporate those passages. Eliminate as much else as possible.

**Conclusion:** Just as stripping down dialogue helps punch up a scene, reducing a scene to a few strong steps toward or away from a goal also lends force and shape. Many authors wander through scene drafts, groping for the point. You can do it differently. Instead, start with the point and enhance from there.

## EXERCISE 46: *Scenes That Can't Be Cut*

---

**Step 1:** Pick any scene and work through exercises 43, 44, and 45.

**Step 2:** Close the original draft of the scene on your computer, or turn over your manuscript. Do not refer to your original draft.

**Step 3:** Write a new first line for the scene. Write a new last line, too.

**Step 4:** Write down five details of the setting. Go for details not normally noticed, such as:

- boundaries (walls, fences, horizon)
- quality of light
- temperature
- smell
- prominent objects in this place

**Step 5:** Without referring to your original version, rewrite the scene. Start with your new first line, end with your new last line. Use the oblique setting details. Incorporate the inner and outer turning points, leaner dialogue, and steps toward/away from goal that you created in exercise 45.

**Conclusion:** Is this rewritten version of your scene better than the original? I'm not surprised. Scenes that are written in the normal flow of accumulating pages may be fine, but often will lack force. Constructing the key elements first can, by contrast, give a scene shape, tautness, and power.

## EXERCISE 47: *The Tornado Effect*

---

**Step 1:** Choose a major plot event.

**Step 2:** Write a passage that details the effect of this event on each point-of-view character in your novel. How does it change each character? How do they see themselves or others differently afterward?

**Step 3:** Write the event not from one point of view but from all. In each passage, incorporate the results of Step 2.

**Conclusion:** The tornado effect is a powerful tool that can magnify the significance of already large plot events. For it to work, though, there must be an actual, transforming effect on each character who experiences it.

## EXERCISE 48: *Connecting Character to Place*

---

**Step 1:** Select a setting in your novel. Note details that are particular to it. Include what is obvious but also details that tourists would miss and only natives would see.

**Step 2:** How does your protagonist *feel* about this place? Go beyond the obvious emotions of nostalgia, bitterness, and a sense of “connection.” Explore specific emotions tied to special times and personal corners of this place.

**Step 3:** Weave details and emotions together into a passage about this place. Add this to your manuscript.

**Conclusion:** It is impossible to powerfully capture a place via objective description, at least, to capture it in a way that readers will not skim. Only through the eyes and heart of a character does place come truly alive. Who in your novel has the strongest feelings about its setting? That character will be a good vehicle for bringing this place alive.

## EXERCISE 49: *Changing the Landscape*

---

**Step 1:** Pick an important setting in your story. Choose a moment when your protagonist or another point-of-view character is there. Using specific details and emotions, create that character's sense of this place.

**Step 2:** Bring that character back to this place one week, or one year, later.

**Conclusion:** Are the two passages that you created in this exercise different? They should be. Measuring the minute differences in a character's perception of a place over time is another way to bring that place alive. Remember, places generally don't much change, but people do.

## EXERCISE 50: *Time and Sentiment*

---

**Step 1:** What is your novel's era? If it is our own, give it a label.

**Step 2:** Write out your protagonist's opinion of his or her times. What does he or she like about them? What does he or she think is wrong?

**Step 3:** Note three details that are particular to this time. Go beyond the obvious details of news events, popular music, clothing, and hairstyles. Find details that only your protagonist would notice.

**Step 4:** Weave the above results into a passage that captures your protagonist's sense of the times.

**Conclusion:** How do you view our times? Are you optimistic? Pessimistic? One thing's for sure, you have an opinion. The same is true of your characters. The times live not in black-on-white words, but in the brightly hued sentiments of your cast. For a strong sense of how people saw historical eras in which they lived, check out contemporaneous essays, editorials, and speeches. (For instance, read Malcolm X's speech "The Ballot or the Bullet." It captures a highly specific moment and mood in African American history.) For a multidimensional sense of the times, examine an era from several characters' points of view.

## EXERCISE 51: *Conjuring a Milieu*

---

**Step 1:** What is your novel's milieu? Give it a label.

**Step 2:** Write out your protagonist's outlook on this milieu. What does he or she feel is best about it? What does he or she believe is the worst about it? What makes it magical? What makes it hell?

**Step 3:** Note three observable details that are particular to this milieu, things that only an insider would see.

**Step 4:** Weave the above results into a passage that captures your protagonist's view of this milieu.

**Conclusion:** Do you know your novel's milieu with an expert's depth of experience? If so, great. If not, there is research. Experts often are glad to share their knowledge and insights. Books, articles, and websites can be helpful, too. It doesn't take many details to conjure a milieu, but a milieu will spring to life most effectively when those details are not known to most people.



## EXERCISE 52: *Setting as Character*

---

**Step 1:** In the world of your novel, select a place of significance or that you wish to make significant.

**Step 2:** What has already happened here? Note one or more past events associated with this place that people remember.

**Step 3:** In what way is this place mysterious or magical? Or, possibly, what makes it completely ordinary?

**Step 4:** What is your protagonist's personal connection to this place? Write it out. Make it specific. How was this place seminal in his or her personal history? What does he or she love about this place? Why is he or she afraid of this place? What stands out about this place, makes it different from any other place like it?

**Step 5:** Does an important plot event occur at this place? Find a second event that can occur here, too.

**Step 6:** Sorry if this sounds obvious, but incorporate the above results into your manuscript—right now.

**Conclusion:** A place is just a place. It isn't alive. It doesn't do anything. Only people do things. In other words, making setting a character isn't really about animating that locale. It is a matter of *you* building a history for it, making big things happen there, giving characters strong feelings about it and, in their minds, making it a place that is magical.

### EXERCISE 53: *Giving Characters Voice*

---

**Step 1:** Find something in your story about which your protagonist has a strong opinion. Sharpen that opinion. Magnify it. Let your protagonist rant, sneer, demur, avoid, laugh at, feel deeply, care less about, or in any way feel even more strongly about whatever it is.

**Step 2:** What are outward, external, observable details of the world in general that only your protagonist finds interesting?

**Step 3:** Find a passage of exposition in your novel, that is, a passage in which we are privy to the thoughts and feelings of a character. Whether you are working in the first person or third person, rewrite this passage so that it is more like how your protagonist or point-of-view character talks.

**Step 4:** Take the same passage from the step above and rewrite it in a way that is the exact opposite of how your protagonist or point-of-view character would speak.

**Conclusion:** Opinions expressed in a natural way, details coupled with a characteristic syntax ... it doesn't matter which approach you choose, only that you choose an approach. Developing a "voice" as a novelist in part means giving your characters voices that are uniquely theirs.

## EXERCISE 54: *Narrative Voice*

---

**Step 1:** Pick any page in your manuscript.

**Step 2:** Rewrite the page. Strip out all opinions, remove all conflict. Choose generic nouns and common verbs. Delete all color and description. Eschew slang. Make the characters bland. Make the action mild. Have as little as possible happen on this page.

**Step 3:** Rewrite this page again. This time fill it with upper-crust formality, understatement, and wit.

**Step 4:** Rewrite this page again. This time write it with slang words and dumbfound disbelief. Make sure that your narrator or point-of-view character takes everything that happens, or is said, personally. Make him or her easily offended.

**Step 5:** This time, write it like a politician, all generalities and evasion, while at the same time emphasizing popular principles and sentiment.

**Step 6:** This time, write it like a foreign tourist, all awe and bewilderment.

**Step 7:** This time, write it like a banker, all caution, thoughtful consideration and weighing of options.

**Step 8:** This time, write it like an old-timer full of wisdom.

**Step 9:** Now rewrite this page as it will appear in print.

**Conclusion:** As you can see, there are many ways to create a narrative voice. It is a matter of choosing it and then using the associated vocabulary, attitude, outlook, and diction. Is neutral your flavor? Objective narration is fine, but first experiment with alternate approaches. You may find that a different voice will better serve your story.

## EXERCISE 55: *Alternate Narrative Perspectives*

---

**Step 1:** Choose any page from your manuscript.

**Step 2:** Rewrite this page in any of these voices and tenses:

- second person, future tense (*you will go, you will see*)
- collective past tense (*we went, we saw*)
- objectified present tense (*it goes, it sees*)

**Step 3:** Rewrite this page from different points of view:

- someone who doesn't speak, but who reacts strongly to everything
- a person with a disability, such as color blindness
- a person with a super power
- an object in the room, such as the ceiling or the carpet

**Step 4:** Rewrite this page in reverse chronological order, then as a journal, finally from a far away place.

**Conclusion:** The object of this exercise is not to make your novel experimental, but to raise your awareness of the choices you make in telling your story. What if you told it from the point of view of a murdered girl in heaven or the point of view of a dog? Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002) and Garth Stein's *The Art of Racing in the Rain* (2008) took those approaches and sold big. Frame-and-flashback timelines and unreliable narrators are nice but all too common. How can you tell your story in a way that's never been done before? It takes courage to violate expectations, but sometimes the reward is a whole new level of success.

**EXERCISE 56: *Effect vs. Cause***

---

**Step 1:** Identify the most improbable event in your novel.

**Step 2:** What about this event makes your protagonist the most afraid? What does your protagonist do in response to that event?

**Step 3:** Escalate and add steps to your protagonist's response. What is the most extreme length to which your protagonist can go?

**Step 4:** What is a level of response beyond *that*? Take your protagonist to that level.

**Conclusion:** In many manuscripts, the protagonist's motivation is shallow. We do not believe that protagonist is driven to action, and often the action to which the protagonist is driven is less than it could be. Pump up the motivation. Pump up the response. You may feel afraid of going too far. But in fact, in most manuscripts, the protagonist does not do enough.

## EXERCISE 57: *The Highly Motivated Villain*

---

**Step 1:** Who is your novel's principal antagonist?

**Step 2:** What is the biggest wrong that your antagonist must do?

**Step 3:** List twelve reasons why someone in real life would not do that, and would also be prevented by others from doing that.

**Step 4:** Work out twelve reasons why, in this case, your antagonist is motivated to do the worst, and also why others are unable to prevent it.

**Step 5:** Incorporate the above results in your manuscript. Do not cheat. Add the extra pages. Put it all in.

**Conclusion:** It takes extra effort, not to mention pages, to fully motivate an antagonist. It also requires you to go to the uncomfortable place where the antagonist can be understood. But it is worth the journey. Similarly, in manuscripts, there often is little to get in the antagonist's way. That produces weak tension. Knocking down real obstacles step by step raises tension and makes improbable actions increasingly plausible.

## EXERCISE 58: *Building Believability*

---

**Step 1:** What is the most improbable event in your novel?

**Step 2:** List twenty reasons why, in the real world, this event would not occur. What prevents it? Who stops it?

**Step 3:** Did you really list twenty reasons? Come on now. Dig deeper. Assume that this improbable event can and will fail to occur. List every last reason why that will be so.

**Step 4:** For each point, work out why and how, in this case, each obstacle fails to prevent the improbable event.

**Step 5:** Incorporate the above results in your manuscript.

**Conclusion:** Even when thrillers are not based on speculative elements, the terrible disaster that looms often fails to frighten. We know it won't really happen. If it could, then in the real world it would happen. But it doesn't. The effect of removing obstacles is to lower readers' resistance to the idea of this awful calamity. Much further than most authors go. This principle applies to novels other than suspense. Every story involves something unlikely. The further you go in removing obstacles, the more your readers will believe. How far is required?

## EXERCISE 59: *Scary Monsters*

---

**Step 1:** Is there are monster in your novel?

**Step 2:** Create three ways in which your monster is very human.

**Step 3:** Motivate your monster. Find nine good reasons for your monster to act. (“Evil” is not a motivation.)

**Step 4:** Find three reasons why your monster does *not* want to act. Make them strong reasons. Include, then overcome, each one in your story.

**Conclusion:** It’s rare in manuscripts to meet a scary monster. Mostly, they are evil, powerful, and unstoppable. That’s fine, but if that evil isn’t motivated, that power isn’t earned, and the monster’s obstacles aren’t real, then evil will feel thin and the monster won’t panic anyone. That’s as true of human monsters as it is of the supernatural kind.



## EXERCISE 60: *Hyperbole*

---

**Step 1:** Choose anything that a character says or thinks.

**Step 2:** Hyperbolize it. Exaggerate. Wildly. Go over the top, out of bounds. Make it crazy-wild.

**Step 3:** Substitute the hyperbole. Watch your readers smile. Okay, you're right, you usually can't see them. Just imagine it.

**Step 4:** Do a hyperbole draft. In your manuscript, find twenty places to hyperbolize.

**Conclusion:** Using hyperbole is not always about getting a laugh. It is a method of useful heightening in any work of fiction. Whether it's a character or it's you, exaggeration both makes a point and scores a point.

## EXERCISE 61: *Social Ironies and Literary Parody*

---

**Step 1:** Ask your protagonist or another character to take a look around at the world. Go on. They don't have anything else to do right now.

**Step 2:** What seems to this character ironic, weird, stupid, or crazy? Note it.

**Step 3:** Somewhere in your manuscript, let your character riff on this subject. Counsel him or her not to hold back. It's okay. No one's listening yet. It's just you and them.

**Step 4:** Is there a literary form that can be parodied in your manuscript? Come to that, is there a business form that can be sent up? A tax form? The key is to play it straight and deadpan. Let just one element provide ridiculous contrast or comparison.

**Conclusion:** Your novels may not be comedic in intent, but a sideways glance at what is ironic or ridiculous rarely goes amiss. Parody is a little more difficult to insert in an otherwise serious novel. If useful, try first creating the parodied element without humor. For instance, realistically lay out IRS tax form 1040K-9. Make it dry and tedious. Only later need you title it "1040K-9, Individual Canine Return," a form for reporting doggie income and deductions.

## EXERCISE 62: *Funny Voices, Funny Events*

---

**Step 1:** Whether using first-person or third-person narration, select a page.

**Step 2:** Make the narration here wry, dry, snarky, acid, offhand, loopy, easily distracted, befuddled, paranoid, panic-stricken, or wacko in any way that comes naturally to you.

**Step 3:** In your story, pick a small- or medium-sized event.

**Step 4:** If it's an ordinary event, make the response to it disproportionately huge. If the event is slightly unusual or colorful, underplay the response.

**Step 5:** If the above steps add something positive to your novel, find nine more places to do something similar. If you are going for outright satire, find 150 places to do things similarly.

**Conclusion:** Finding a comic narrative tone is easier when you put yourself in the right frame of mind. Get crazy. Become obsessed. Freak out. Oh, you're paying a therapist to help you stop that? Sorry. At any rate, even a novel as serious as a thriller can at times use a little levity. Think of James Bond. Every novel should, somewhere, at least make us crack a smile.

### EXERCISE 63: *Tension in Dialogue*

---

**Step 1:** In your manuscript, find any passage of dialogue.

**Step 2:** Brainstorm ways to create antipathy between the speakers. Set them against each other. Use simple disagreement, a clash of personalities, a struggle over status, competing egos, plain loathing, or any other conflict.

**Step 3:** Without looking at your original draft, rewrite the dialogue so that the conflict between the speakers themselves is impossible to miss.

**Conclusion:** Conflict in dialogue can be as polite as poison, or as messy as hatchets. The approach is up to you. The important thing is to get away from ambling chitchat and get right to the desire of two speakers to defeat each other. If it's strong on the page, it hardly will matter what they're talking about. Even innocuous chatter can become deadly. For instance, *Would you like sugar for your tea?* is sweet and bland. Try stirring in some acid: *I suppose you'd like sugar for your tea? Never mind. Of course you do. Your type always does.*

**EXERCISE 64: *Tension in Action***

---

**Step 1:** In your manuscript, find any action. It can be incidental, small, or high action.

**Step 2:** From whose point of view do we experience this action? What is the character feeling at this moment? Find a conflicting emotion.

**Step 3:** Note visual details of this action that are *oblique*—that is, details that would be noticed only on second look.

**Step 4:** Without referring to your original draft, and using the results from the steps above, rewrite the action.

**Conclusion:** High action immediately benefits from having torn emotions folded in. What about small and incidental action? Is it too much to add feelings to crossing a room? Maybe. But consider the difference. *He crossed the room.* Not bad. But how about ... *He drifted across the room. Was he dreaming? Was he dead?* A bit different, isn't it? Small actions can be overloaded, certainly, but on the other hand there is little tension in plain, everyday action. True tension lies inside.

## EXERCISE 65: *Tension in Exposition*

---

**Step 1:** Find in your manuscript any passage of exposition. Sometimes called *interior monologue*, this is any passage in which we experience a character's inner thoughts and feelings.

**Step 2:** Identify the primary emotion in this passage, then write down its opposite.

**Step 3:** Look at what this character is thinking. Summarize the main idea in his or her mind. Now find a conflicting idea.

**Step 4:** If the passage involves mulling over something that has happened earlier, identify something about the prior occurrence that your character failed to realize or notice. Raise a hitherto unasked question. What *new* reasons does your character have to feel uneasy, anxious, or in danger?

**Step 5:** Without looking at your original draft, rewrite the exposition incorporating the conflicting emotions or warring ideas. Make the contrast strong. Add fresh questions and worries.

**Conclusion:** Many authors feel it is important to portray what is going on in their characters' heads, but what they forget is that much of that material has already been felt and thought by readers. Rehashing what already is obvious does not heighten it. It merely saps tension. Exposition is a time for what is new: extra questions, fresh anxiety, unforeseen angles. Think of exposition as plot turns. It's just plot that plays out in the mind.

## EXERCISE 66: *Avoiding Low-Tension Traps*

---

**Step 1:** In your manuscript, find any passage that has a weather or landscape description, backstory, aftermath, travel, description, or foreshadowing.

**Step 2:** Determine what your point-of-view character feels most strongly here. Write down the opposite of that.

**Step 3:** Without looking at your original draft, rewrite this passage and build in the conflicting emotions you've identified.

**Step 4:** Find twenty-five places in your manuscript to repeat the above steps.

**Conclusion:** Tension traps occur in every manuscript. I know because I skim those passages. You don't want that. Generally speaking, it is best to start with action, cut backstory, avoid aftermath, limit description, and use foreshadowing rarely. But why not learn how transform this material with tension? The range of tools in your story kit will be greater.

## EXERCISE 67: *Writing Violence*

---

**Step 1:** Find a violent action in your novel.

**Step 2:** Deconstruct this violent action into its three, four or five most distinct visual pictures, the stills that freeze-frame the sequence.

**Step 3:** Look closely at each still picture. For each, write down something in the image that we would not immediately notice.

**Step 4:** For each picture, put your point-of-view character in a psychiatrist's chair. Ask, *what do you feel at this precise moment?* Discard the obvious emotions: shock, horror, fear. For each step of the action, write down a secondary emotion.

**Step 5:** Without looking at your original draft, rewrite this passage of violence using the results of the steps above. Pick and choose, of course, but draw heavily from your lists.

**Conclusion:** Film directors take a lot of time to storyboard violent action. Each shot is carefully planned, then the shots are edited together to make the sequence. Novelists rarely spend as much time planning their violence. Violence in many manuscripts is rushed. Essential visual action is dry and objective, or sometimes buried and difficult to follow. Focusing on less obvious visual details and unexpected emotions can make violence visceral and fresh. Breaking it down into steps, meanwhile, makes the action easy to follow.



## EXERCISE 68: *Writing Sex*

---

**Step 1:** Find a sex scene (or potential sex scene) in your novel.

**Step 2:** Deconstruct this sex sequence into its four, five, or six most interesting visual pictures, the stills that freeze-frame the sequence.

**Step 3:** Look at each still picture. For each, write down a visual detail that is oblique—that is, not obvious.

**Step 4:** For each picture, put your point-of-view character in a psychiatrist's chair. Ask, *what do you feel at this precise moment?* Discard obvious feelings of desire, longing, lust. Capture secondary emotions.

**Step 5:** Without looking at your original draft, rewrite this sex scene using the material created in the steps above. Pick and choose, of course, but draw heavily from your lists.

**Conclusion:** Sex scenes in many manuscripts throw off little heat. Some authors feel it is better to draw the curtain. In some stories, that may be true. Still, why not practice ways to make the act itself fresh and surprising? Oblique details and secondary emotions can create a sequence that is sensual and exciting without being crudely pornographic.

## EXERCISE 69: *Tension From Nothing*

---

**Step 1:** Find in your story a moment when nothing at all is happening.

**Step 2:** Identify the point-of-view character. Write down whatever emotion he or she is feeling at this moment. Also write down the opposite of this feeling.

**Step 3:** Note three or more details of the time and place of this dead moment. What objects are around? What exact kind of light or darkness is there? At what pace is time moving? What mood is in the air? What is different now than a day ago?

**Step 4:** How would your character describe himself or herself at this moment?

**Step 5:** Create a passage in which this moment of action is filled with everything you created in the steps above, especially the contrasting emotions.

**Conclusion:** Some experience is intangible, yet that which is not outwardly active still can be dynamic. Every minute has a mood. Every moment has meaning. Mood is built from environmental details, and meaning proceeds from emotions. Tension springs from the weaving of these elements into a passage that precisely captures small visual details and surgically dissects the large feelings that fill a silence.

## EXERCISE 70: *The Uncommon in Common Experience*

---

**Step 1:** Think about these questions: Is your story realistic? Are your characters ordinary people?

**Step 2:** What, in the world of your story, makes you angry? What are we not seeing? What is the most important question? What puzzle has no answer? What is dangerous in this world? What causes pain?

**Step 3:** Where, in the world of your story, is there unexpected grace? What is beautiful? Who is an unrecognized hero? What needs to be saved?

**Step 4:** Give your feelings to a character. Who can stand for something? Who can turn the main problem into a cause?

**Step 5:** Create a situation in which this character must defend, explain, or justify his or her actions. How is the problem larger than it looks? Why does it matter to us all?

**Conclusion:** Passion is expansive. It sweeps us up, carries us away. What is your passion? Get it into your story, especially through your characters. What angers you can anger them. What lifts them up will inspire us in turn. Ordinary people don't need to be bland. They can be poets, prophets, and saints. Their world is a microcosm. Why else are you writing about it?

**EXERCISE 71: *The Common in Uncommon Experience***

**Step 1:** Think about these questions: Is your story about uncommon events? Are your characters out of the ordinary?

**Step 2:** Find for your hero a failing that is human, a universal frustration, a humbling setback, or any experience that everyone has had. Add this early in the manuscript.

**Step 3:** What, in the world of the story, is timelessly true? What cannot be changed? How is basic human nature exhibited? What is the same today as a hundred years ago, and will be the same a hundred years ahead?

**Step 4:** What does your protagonist do the same way as everyone? What is his or her lucky charm? Give this character a motto. What did the character learn from his or her mom or dad?

**Step 5:** Create a situation in which your exceptional protagonist is in over his or her head, feels unprepared, is simply lost, or in any other way must admit that they're not perfect.

**Conclusion:** While racing to save the world, it's nice to know that your Herculean hero is human after all. Even the most rarefied milieu is, in some way, just like the world in which you and I toil. Including those details and moments makes your extraordinary story one to which many readers can relate.

## EXERCISE 72: *The Moral of the Story*

---

**Step 1:** Think about these questions, and make notes about how to strengthen your narrative: Is there a moral or a lesson in your story?

**Step 2:** When does your protagonist realize that he or she got something wrong?

**Step 3:** Who in the story can, at the end, see things in a completely different way?

**Step 4:** At the end, how is your hero or heroine better off?

**Step 5:** At the end, what does your hero or heroine regret?

**Step 6:** Who, in the midst of the story, is certain that there is no solution nor is there any way to fully comprehend the problem?

**Step 7:** Why is the problem good, timely, universal, or fated?

**Conclusion:** Providing something for readers to take away doesn't require lecturing or teaching a lesson. The story by itself is an example. The problem is the teacher. The students are your characters. Make your points through them—simply. The more you hammer your readers with your moral, the less likely they are to acknowledge your point.

### EXERCISE 73: *The Fire in Fiction—A Master Technique*

---

**Step 1:** Choose any scene that seems to you weak or wandering. Who is the point-of-view character?

**Step 2:** Identify whatever this character feels most strongly in this scene. Fury? Futility? Betrayal? Hope? Joy? Arousal? Shame? Grief? Pride? Self-loathing? Security?

**Step 3:** Recall your own life. What was the time when you most strongly felt the emotion that you identified in the last step?

**Step 4:** Detail your own experience: When precisely did this happen? Who was there? What was around you? What do you remember best about the moment? What would you most like to forget? What was the quality of the light? What exactly was said? What were the smallest, and largest, things that were done?

**Step 5:** In this experience in your life, what twisted the knife, or put the icing on the cake? It would have stirred this feeling anyway, but what *really* provoked it was ... what?

**Step 6:** What did you think to yourself as the importance of this experience struck you?

**Step 7:** Give the details of your experience to your character, right now, in this very scene.

**Conclusion:** Steal from life. That's what it's for, isn't it? How often, when something bad happened to you, did you think to yourself, *at least this will be good material for a story some day!* Well, now's your chance. What has happened to you, its details and specifics, are a tool to make this scene personal and powerful. They are what make any story feel real. Use this method whenever you are stuck or if inspiration simply is low. It is the way to put fire in your fiction every day.