
HOW TO
DO THINGS
WITH
STORIES
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How to Do Things With Stories

A Guide to Transformative Storycraft

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Contents

Introduction

To be an artist, so they say, is to climb an uncharted inner mountain and wait for visions. There are no rules to creative achievement, no systems or processes that consistently bring success. The content of a work is the riddle of the artist's soul.

But an artist, or a prospective artist, might well ask: if art is so mysterious, what is its value? If it is the product of an unknowable soul, how can it mean anything to others? And how can some art come to be seen as "better"?

More directly: what am I doing?
How can I get better at it?
Can I get better at it?
What is it *for*? These are haunting questions, and not only for artists.

But artists suffer these doubts acutely. In order to numb the pain of self-doubt so that art can go on being made, writers have created the genre of artistic self-help: books with titles like "How to be an Artist", "How to be a Novelist", "How to Write Creatively", and so on.

To provide answers to the central questions of an artist's purpose, this genre usually resorts to more art: they begin with the inner mountain, as before, but they adorn it with valleys and streams and shaded glens, with ogres and shepherds and Knights Templar. If the effort is a success, it is because the writer finds hidden in the metaphors something that resonates with the metaphors within herself and gives her the resolve to carry on.

Ultimately, I find this approach unsatisfying. If you find it unsatisfying too, then you are reading the right kind of book.

I find it unsatisfying because it answers soul-searching questions about art from within the artistic mode. As encouraging as that might be to the fully committed artist, it does little for someone who is already at the edge of art, questioning its importance, its value. She may ask: whatever it is that I am doing as an artist, does it really bring value to the world? Why not use writing in ways that have more obvious effects, like becoming a journalist, or promoting a non-profit?

To answer the question of purpose, rather than simply pushing it into the pages of someone else's book, it's necessary to step outside the world of the pure artist long enough to consider the concerns of a practical person living their practical life. What is it that practical-minded people care about? They care about *doing* things. Accordingly, this book dedicates itself to the question of the practical-minded artist: how can I do things with art?

In this book we will focus on one art form: storytelling; and one medium: the written word. At times, we'll also discuss plays, screenplays, and song lyrics in their written form. I hope it will become clear that it's possible to apply the principles we will learn in any context where language is used creatively, be it a personal letter, an obituary, or a reflective essay. More than this, I hope that by the end of this book, I will have said something valuable about the whys and wherefores of art in general, even art that has no use at all for words.

So, what is the answer? How do we do things with stories? To answer that question clearly and fully, I will unfortunately require no less than the first four chapters of this book. Nevertheless I offer a preview:

I. Art uses *ambiguity* to invite the reader to form *interpretations,* thereby creating *meaning*.
II. Stories challenge the reader's evolving interpretations by inducing and then resolving *tension*. An episode of tension opens questions in the reader's mind that linger on after the tension has been resolved, permanently altering their mental world.

You may now be thinking: so much for practical-minded! I agree that this principle may seem a bit arcane. I will show that it can be used for practical ends. Still, my intention is not to mislead; there must always be an element of the arcane in art. The creative mode is one of many ways that we humans explore our relationship with the unknown. Breaking away from order and abandoning good sense is an irreducible part of that process.

The "sacred inner mountain" writers surely have got one thing right: there is no instruction manual for a work of art. My intention here is not to do the impossible and write one. Rather, I want to show that the arcane aspect of art is compatible with acting with a known purpose. We can still have an impact, and we can even know to some

degree what that impact will be.

Think of the advice in this book like a buoy out on a choppy sea. Whether you be an endurance swimmer or a recreational dog-paddler, every now and again everyone needs to come back to a place of rest and support. Together, we'll build a solid structure in that sea: something you can take hold of after a hard day spent awash in the waves of creation. May you use it to steady yourself with a sense of place: a sense of what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how it fits into the broader world of human labours.

Chapter 1: What Can be Done?

In this book, we'll tend to ignore questions of what makes art "good" or "bad", "literary" or "pulp". Instead, we ask what makes it *effective* or *ineffective*.

The word "effective" implies an action with intention. Consider the explosion of a vaccuum cleaner bag. There may be many *effects* on the surrounding area, but that does not mean the explosion was *effective*. There are two conditions for a thing to be effective:

A) someone must have created it or used it, and
B) the results must line up with the goal they had in mind.

Who is the "someone" for a book? All signs point to the writer. For our purposes we will ignore the intentions of anyone else—the reader, the critic, society, me—and focus only on that of the writer in the process of conceiving, planning, writing, and editing her book.

For the writer to aim to make her book effective, she must intend some kind of effect. Presumably this effect should be on the *mind* of the *reader*; there is enough uncertainty without bringing in other people, or other body parts. So that she can choose her goal wisely, she also should have a sense of scope, of the range of things that can actually be done to the reader's mind through the medium of a book.

But before we examine what might lie in this range, let's take a closer look at the fundamentals of the book–reader interaction. We will zoom in on the elementary particles of a book, its words, and ask ourselves: how is it that words have any effect on us at all?

All thinking is about connections: from one memory to another, from a face to a feeling, from a wise proverb to a moment when it was necessary to defy it. Thinking links our experiences to each other. It bundles them into ideas, bundles ideas into perspectives on the world. Just as importantly, thinking breaks connections. It undoes links through the passive process of forgetting, and through the active process of rejecting what no longer holds or no longer serves us.

If thinking truly is about making and breaking connections, then we can say the same thing about language, and hence about the process of reading.

In language, there are two basic ways to make a connection. The first is like this: I point to a stream and say “water”. By doing this I help teach a connection between the word “water” and the sights and sounds of the thing it stands for. I make a bridge between the personal world of sensory experience and the common world of words.

The second way to make connections is the one we use in literature: we string words together into sentences. We make bridges *between* concepts. Like this:

> “Jane hopped onto the alligator’s back.”

That sentence had (I hope) a noticeable effect on your mind as you read it; yet it was your imagination, not the words, that did the bulk of the work.

You likely conjured up a rough idea of a person named “Jane”, made them perform the action “hop onto”, and as the target of that action brought in a concept of “alligator”—focusing on just one aspect, its back.

By repeating this exercise often enough, the Jane-alligator connection could be strengthened in your mind. Every time you saw an alligator, you would think of that hopping Jane; and every time you met someone named Jane, you would immediately picture their solo attempt to start an alligator rodeo. This is how we make connections with language.

We also discussed *breaking* connections. How can we do that?

Earlier, we talked about how thinking can break connections by revealing that they are faulty. But that is not the only way, or even the best way, to break connections as a writer. If I tell you that in fact Janes are exceedingly unlikely to ride any alligators, I may convince your mind, but I won’t undo the conditioning that made you associate Janes with alligators in the first place. In fact, I may even reinforce it because it is still a conversation of alligators and Janes.

One way to actively break a connection is to create a crop of rival connections that outcompete it. If you moved to a world where everyone named Jane was occupied as an ice cream truck driver, with no other interests or hobbies, all the other “Janes”

in your mind—Jane the librarian, Jane the alligator rider, *etc., etc.*—would fade out of recognition. Their connections would be *pruned*.

This picture is accurate within reasonable limits, but we're still far shy of a real understanding of how language influences us. In practice, our test sentence will probably not be effective. It lacks context, so the association between Jane and alligators does not settle deeply into the reader's mind. Also, merely repeating an identical phrase is usually not enough to make it more memorable: we very quickly become numb to the news that Jane has once again hopped onto an alligator's back. For a better example, we need to understand how excitement and inhibition affect the connection-making process, which means we have to add emotion to the mix.

Roughly speaking, humans are driven by core desires that come from a fairly small set: we want to stay away from sickness and danger; we want to seek out what keeps us well and allows us to grow; and we want to pass something of ourselves on into the future, whether through creation or procreation. These drives have a physical life in the brain. The home of these core drives is the most central part of the brain: the brain stem. Without it, we aren't.

The brain stem may think, but its thoughts are *ineffable*: it has no use for language or even for words. Its concerns are just those three drives: appetite, fear, sex. If we have words for these concerns, it's only because there's a lot more to us than the brain stem.

When we compare our own brains to those of other animals, we see how much humans have specialized in over-clocking that soft, mashable, sugar-hungry little organ. Our brains consist of complex, overlapping, interconnected structures. The connections of those structures form a tangled web that fans up and outward from the brain stem like the branches of a tree: widening, splitting up into segments, wrapping around one another—but always rooted in the stem, that is, the trunk.

Over the course of our evolutionary history, the brain's structures tended to build up in layers. Inner structures, closer to the brain stem, were more likely to stay the same over generations. Meanwhile, younger, more outward layers formed to serve new purposes. They had more freedom to change through evolution because they were less foundational.

Ultimately, these more outward layers gave us humans the ability to form complex plans

that could succeed in a wider range of circumstances: “see food–eat it” became “see food–save it–eat it” became “see food–plant it–harvest it–save it–eat it”, and so on.

What this toy model gives us is a way to think about emotions. Emotions seem to live in the in-between layers of our brains, not the specialized outside or the stem that powers our primal drives. They mediate between the two layers, translating from one way of understanding into another.

In this way, emotions adapt our primal drives to new scenarios that arise as our worldviews become more complex. A little primal death-fear resides at the heart of one’s disgust at unwashed hands, a little primal hunger at the root of one’s curiosity. Through words we address our emotions, and through emotions we understand the functioning of our primal drives, which are always concerned with the continuation of life.

As writers, we transmit words to our eventual readers. What we do not do is choose how our readers will understand those words. Our phrases activate ideas and trigger flashes of association. Our goal, as writers, is to write in a way that resonates deeply: that triggers recognition at an emotional and even primal level.

Taken individually, each word in a story has the power to alter the associations in a reader’s mind. Taken as a whole, these effects build up into chain reactions. Hundreds of shifts occur as a result of each sentence, thousands more playing out over time as the cascade of each passage runs into the cascade of the next. Ripples of association and emotional resonance reverberate through the brain, illuminating everything from the rational circuitry of the neocortex to the naked impulses of the brain stem and effecting transformation. It is a transformation slightly determined in its broad features by the vision of the author, but in its details it is unpredictable to both reader and writer.

This, in broad outline, is how words on a page alter the mind. When they affect us deeply, they trigger emotions that excite us to our core. This has an important consequence: everything in the brain connects back to our core, so things that shift our core have the potential to also shift things everywhere else in the brain. In other words, the deeper the resonance of your writing, the less predictable its effect on your readers.

This does not mean that a writer who seeks to master the art must give up on understanding the impact that her words will have. Amidst the chaos of mental transformation that occurs during reading, there are islands of predictability. To find them, one must form

an idea of the reader.

If there's one piece of writing advice we all know, it's this: "Know your audience". But there's more to it than that. In order to sharpen the intentionality of your writing, I say that you must ask yourself two questions:

1. Who is your audience?
2. What do you want to *do* to them?

Write with an individual person in mind. They can be imagined or otherwise, but the more detail the better. Make believe that you perceive their innermost self: their likes, their dislikes, their loves, their hates, their highest hopes, their darkest fears. Finally, with that understanding in mind, imagine an effect: change an opinion, cleanse a confusion, infuse a dream with the courage to realize it. This will form the basis for the direction of your story.

The writer may blanch at the idea of aiming for a specific effect on the reader. It might sound manipulative, even arrogant. On the contrary, humility is a fundamental requirement of effective writing: the writer must always be aware of the chaos of effect and how a real reader's experience will veer away from the writer's intention. Nevertheless, if the writer dislikes intended effects even as an ideal, there is another way to frame the work we will do in the coming chapters.

Writing is a lot like teaching: where teaching is the giving of knowledge, writing is the giving of experience. By offering her experience, a writer enriches the reader's life: she offers a new perspective, a new way of thinking, a new way of being.

There is a close relationship between writing and one kind of teaching: what is known as the Socratic method. Through the Socratic method, the student is invited through questioning to uncover the things that they already know. Similarly, writing invites readers to question their beliefs, often without their even realizing it. Through this questioning, readers begin to educate themselves. This is the alchemy we will explore in the coming chapters, and its inner workings are the same whether one's aim is to influence or to share.

With all this in mind, let's return to our test sentence, and see if we can deepen its resonance.

Jane had been walking for hours. It was strange that a town once so familiar could change so little and yet be entirely alien to her. This was the site of her new beginning, but it was full of ghosts.

Muddy cleats scuffed the sidewalk that ran parallel to the mottled grass of a silent public park. Halfway along the edge of that park, Jane turned her head to look across the blank expanse. By chance, a row of maples led her eye to a playground on the opposite end.

A flash of reminiscence tugged her toward it. That bright red slide, where her mother had caught her. Those dark blue swings, where her mother had pushed her.

Her mother was nowhere now. The pieces of her that remained had sunk into the abysses of memory, and every replacement the foster care system could provide had joined her there—not as deep, but just as lost.

The city held promise of a fresh start. It was flush with traffic jams and “HELP WANTED” signs. Jane was here by choice, needing nothing to complete her. Still, she wondered what could have led her in all this concrete sprawl to one little playground that sighed to her of lost times.

Jane had crossed the threshold onto the sand. In front of her was a turquoise alligator, resting on a tightly coiled spring.

There was something about this playground toy that seized her attention. What was it? Had she ridden it? Had she been warned away from it? Had it been good? Evil?

She looked around to assure herself that the park was still empty. Then, with a sense both playful and piercing of broken taboo, Jane hopped onto the alligator’s back.

Chapter 2: Ambiguity

As we've seen, the writer can't send messages straight to the brain stem, home to the reader's core drives. Instead, as the reader reads, signals travel inward from the language centres of his brain, through many intermediate layers that will change how the message is taken. This is what keeps writing, most of the time, from overpowering the reader with profound emotion.

What are we to do, then, if profound emotion is our goal? It is certainly not a matter of choosing profound words. Experiences that stir a person to their innermost core are not so cheap that they can be brought on just by seeing the word "love" printed on a page. What really brings on such an experience is the constellation of memories, buried thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that such a word points to. If all these things were brought to mind every time we saw the word "love", our lives would become impractical.

More than this, sometimes what we want to invoke is not just a profound emotion but a profound experience. Terror, ecstasy, awe: these all describe mental states that come upon us like whirlwinds and pluck us from the mundane, reshaping us. Profound experiences transform profoundly. They create memories, they create associations, but more than that they change us in a way that makes it difficult to remember what we were before. If we can't remember what it was like to be the former version of ourselves, before the transformation, that also means that we can't remember the transformation itself. We can't retrace our steps through it because it eclipsed us. It overwhelmed even our ability to serve as chroniclers of ourselves. The words for such experiences are only the shadows they leave behind.

The basic problem of art, for the intentional artist, is that experiences become harder to describe as they become more profound—that is, more deeply and widely experienced in the inner world. Correspondingly, more profound experiences lead to greater changes in thought and behaviour. The capacity of the writer to change others seems limited by the capacity of her words to describe profound experiences.

To better understand this problem, we can make a useful connection between writing and another field: hypnosis. Writers and hypnotists are both trying to influence their subject. In doing this work, hypnotists have to deal with a key limitation. It is a limitation that in truth happens to be liberating, and something of a relief. It is also something that hypnosis and writing have in common. The limitation is this: for hypnosis to work, the person being hypnotized has to consent.

It's not merely a legal issue. If the subject does not suspend judgment and fix their attention on the hypnotist, nothing will happen. By doing those two things, suspending judgment and fixing attention, the subject enters into a partnership with the hypnotist and becomes a co-conspirator in their own transformation. So it is as well with the written word.

The reader who suspends judgment and gives their full attention to what they are reading will be more deeply affected by the work. The writer can't *make* him do this, but she can make it easier. When a reader is in this state of consent, the writer's words are not only interpreted but internalized: the prose flows through the reader's mind almost as if it were his own stream of consciousness. Accordingly, a condition of this state of consent is that he is able to imagine himself thinking the thoughts of the prose. Hence it is down to two factors: the writer's style—natural, flowing, unaffected, but above all else matching the voice her reader expects—and the reader's propensity to imagine. Needless to say, she only has control over the one.

But writing immersive prose—that is, prose that is easy to internalize—is more than a matter of crafting a style that fits comfortably in the reader's mind. If it fits *too* comfortably, the reader might grow bored and abandon the effort of full immersion.

The prose must keep him active, looking for something. It must pose a problem. It must present uncertainty. In a word, it must be *ambiguous*.

An ambiguous statement is one that has more than one meaning. A simple example is this double entendre, common in fairy tales: "I'd love to have you for dinner".

Some ambiguity is merely confusing to the reader, obscuring what the author intended. At other times it can be used for humour, like Groucho Marx's famous quip:

"I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got into my pyjamas I'll never know."

In this case the ambiguity comes from the first sentence: does the clause “in my pyjamas” apply to the object (“an elephant”) or to the subject (“I”)? The second interpretation is much more likely than the first, so the typical receiver of these words simply lets the nonsensical option pass by unnoticed—until it is pulled back into view with the final sentence, which reveals it to have been the correct version of events all along.

When ambiguity is confusing, it is because false meanings obstruct the reader’s efforts to interpret the text. When it is humorous, it is because an apparently false meaning, smuggled in under a blanket of muddled syntax, suddenly leaps out to upstage the mundane one.

But ambiguity can have still another effect: it compels the reader to fill in details. The more difficult it is to form an interpretation he is satisfied with, and the more strongly he is compelled by the writing to persevere, the more of his mind will be drawn into the effort—and, accordingly, the more profoundly the work can affect him.

Let’s consider an example: two lines of a song lyric that I have invented for the purpose.

“I was never just fine Darling, ‘til I met you”

Take a moment to form an interpretation. Read it (or sing it) out loud. Ask yourself, what are these lines saying?

When you’re ready, I’ll tell you what I had in mind when I wrote it.

There are two interpretations. In both of them, we see a love song from one lover to another. In the first, the lyricist used to feel that something was always ‘off’ in her life; she was ill at ease, never able to feel well and whole. Then she met her lover, the subject of the song, and everything changed. Now, she’s just fine.

In the second interpretation, the lyricist used to live a tumultuous life that sent her rocketing from the highest peaks to the deepest valleys. Sometimes beautiful, sometimes harrowing, at least it was never boring.

Then she met her lover and, slowly, that changed. The development of compromise and routine sanded the edges off of her life. Now there is no longer any suspense, any excitement, just the humdrum of a sheltered life. She’s just fine.

Depending on the context around the lyrics, or even the tone of the accompanying melody, a skilled composer could bring out either one of these meanings or even a shade

of both. In any case, I'd be willing to bet that your gloss of that couplet brought out something about your current attitude toward romantic bonds.

In this case, the ambiguity we're focusing on comes from two slightly different meanings of the phrase "just fine": it can mean "untroubled, comfortable" or it can mean "tediously ordinary". Likewise, the use of "darling" could be sincere, ironic, or sarcastic. It is similar to the kind of ambiguity expressed in the sentence "I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas" except that it relies on different meanings of idioms rather than different ways of parsing the syntax. Both of these may be called "ambiguity of interpretation".

There are other types of ambiguity. In order to discuss them, we must narrow our scope from language in general to focus on the act of storytelling.

In real life, when a stranger says something to me out of the blue, my first instinct is to guess that they are trying to give me information about the real world. This guess is often right. It serves as a guardrail for the process of interpretation. If I don't know why this stranger is speaking to me, I can start with the guess that there is something they think I should know.

When the reader opens a book of fiction, he knowingly takes on the blessing and the curse of being deprived of this guardrail. The writer is not there to give him information about the real world, but to guide him through the events of a fictional world. By definition, he does not need to know about these events. Their repercussions cannot affect him, for the events are fictional and he is real. The reader might nonetheless enjoy learning of these events, but still he can always ask: why is this writer speaking to me? He might not find an obvious answer.

Yet somewhere in the sequence of unreal events, the real reader must be changed. How else could he find value in it? The events influence the reader by calling up memories; memories of real people, places, and things, some of them having deep emotional significance. The action of the story, the unfurling web of discoveries, connections, and conflicts, will thereby reach into the reader's gut, stirring it around according to the significance to him of the things that were called to mind.

Put another way, the reader plays out the story within a boundary, a circle of make-believe we call the magic circle of fiction. Yet as the reader becomes engaged, he naturally connects parts of his own mind to the elements within that circle.

This leads us directly to another phenomenon: *ambiguity of symbolism*. Unlike ambiguity of interpretation, which comes from word choice and grammar, this type of ambiguity begins in the relationship between text and reader. It might ask something like: is this hectoring mentor character more like my English teacher, who seemed like an abusive taskmaster at first but ultimately helped me grow? Or is he more like another figure in my life, a bully, who belittled me as a way of coping with his own self-doubt? As the reader goes on, the two interpretations struggle with one another. Through that struggle, the memories themselves, the reader's understanding of his own relationships, may also change.

Naturally, the writer has no control over this kind of change, because she has no control over how the reader will symbolically identify the people and events of the story with elements of his own inner life. Still, she can make educated guesses.

The writer brings to mind the picture of her ideal reader. She imagines the elements of his inner life and how they map onto the evolving system of the story.

She uses bits and pieces that her larger audience is likely to be familiar with: nagging mothers, perhaps, or comforting ones; cocky classroom rivals, or micromanaging bosses. Perhaps she casts her net a little wider and brings in archetypes from literary theory: the mentor, the trickster, etc., taking and clothing them with details natural to the world of the story.

Finally, when unsure, she tests her creations against herself, asking: who does this character remind me of, and who do I *want* them to remind me of? Testing her own reaction is a convenient guide to guessing the reaction of someone else.

In real life, we often find that the most interesting people are the ones with contradicting characteristics, because these contradictions point to a deeper complexity. The same is true for fictional characters. The more striking the contrasts between the superficial elements of a character's personality, the more that character will tend to "draw the eye" of the reader, compelling him to solve the mystery. In the process, the reader delves deeper into the world of the story: a world that he, on foundations laid by the writer, will help to build.

Chapter 3: Tension

Not every sequence of events is a story. Consider some instructions for making bread: you put flour and water in a bowl, add yeast, stir it up, let it rise, knead the dough, bake it. That's a sequence of events, but it's not a story. It's still not a story if I translate it to the first-person past tense.

There are two things that make a story a story. First, it must have *tension*: a desire for a certain outcome that is shared between the reader and one or more of the characters. Second, there must be some *flux* in that tension. What this means is that the tension must evolve in the course of the story's events.

The presence of change implies uncertainty—in this case, uncertainty as to how events will unfold. This uncertainty is ultimately what pulls the reader in and allows him to be influenced. To turn my baking instructions into a story, all I need to add is a pinch of self-doubt, a soupçon of eagerness to please one's judgmental baker boyfriend. Now there is a stake in the outcome, and the reader experiences it as a story.

The uncertain future of a story, viewed from a moment within the story, is a kind of ambiguity. We'll call it *ambiguity of path*. The kind of path we're talking about is the path of a reader in terms of *tension*.

As the story evolves, characters have their own tension arcs: they come closer to what they want, they are pulled away, their desires shift and the direction of tension changes. As the reader experiences the story, he shares in these changes to some degree. He empathizes with characters and feels their struggles, shares in their defeats and victories, anticipates things on their behalf. It is uncertainty in the tension arc from the perspective of the *reader*, not any particular character, that ultimately defines ambiguity of path.

What all the ambiguities have in common, whether ambiguity of interpretation, ambiguity of symbolism, or ambiguity of path, is that they compel the reader to choose between several possible ways of experiencing the story. In the case of path, each distinct interpretation is a distinct *projection* of the arc of narrative tension. If the

projections were put into words, they might read like this:

“Right now, the bank robber is on the run from the cops and has stashed her loot in a sewer—and she will give them the slip. Then she’ll get her loot and get away clean.” or “Right now, the bank robber is on the run from the cops—and she *is* going to get away, for now. But she is too cocky. Sooner or later, it’s going to catch up to her.”

In order for the tension on the part of the characters to translate into *felt* tension for the reader, the reader must sympathize with their desires: the character must *lack* something that the reader *wants them to have*. But the reader must also be able to imagine multiple arcs for this desire. He must be able to picture the character both getting what they want, and not getting it.

This is the reason why an “un-scratchable” hero becomes boring, no matter how epic his feats: if the reader never sees the hero bleed, he will eventually cease to imagine him failing. As a result, the story loses ambiguity of path; the reader’s projection is a flat line; and, without some other kind of ambiguity to pique his interest, the reader is unlikely to see it through.

On the obverse, if a hero sees even a little injury, that adds interest to a story even if the story belongs to a genre where the hero always wins. This is because the reader’s experience of tension has little to do with what the reader consciously believes will happen—they may even already know how the story ends! The alternative outcomes to what the reader expects still live in the reader’s subconscious, and they can be brought to mind with even very subtle cues.

Let’s take a closer look at how the paths of characters create the path of the reader. Remember that the arc of a reader may be very different than the arc of any one character. As an example, think of a story where a character starts out sympathetic: she wants a better world for everyone and fights for those she loves. Sometimes she seems to cause unnecessary harm, but her motives are good and the reader still wants to see her achieve her goals. But somewhere along her path, she does something that the reader can no longer excuse, something that reveals something corrupt about her priorities. The reader breaks with her. Suddenly he sees her as the villain, not the hero, wants her to fail, not succeed; and when the climax of the story shows her ultimate failure, it brings everything to a gut-wrenching conclusion where one’s memories of

the protagonist early in the story echo dissonantly with memories of what she was in the end. There is literally a “twist” of the tension arc where the reader’s perception of the tension arc turns upside down relative to the protagonist.

An effective story requires two closely intertwined features: there must be more than one possible interpretation, and the reader must care which one is true. It is the reader’s concern that tugs on the distinct interpretations and draws them into competition. As he fights for one or the other or struggles to choose between them, he becomes absorbed at a deeper level than he does in the normal interpretation of language. He learns more about himself in much the same way he would if he were forced to choose between careers, or cities, or lovers.

Ambiguity of symbolism works the same way. In ambiguity of symbolism, there is tension between interpretations as to what a certain character, event, conflict, etc. most closely resembles in the reader’s own life. Different symbolic mappings lead to different stakes in the outcome.

Take, for example, a reader’s encounter with an apparently minor character. The character is a sort of rascal, a “bad boy” who likes to scrap. Other characters use their power over him to keep him in check, and the reader starts to sympathize with him and feel that he’s being treated unfairly. He starts to connect the character to himself, to identify with the character.

Suddenly, the rascal is launched into a position of power. Immediately he uses it to take revenge on his handlers and does evil things to advance his own power. If the transition is believable enough, the reader may then feel an inner revulsion: what is it in me, he may ask himself, that caused me to identify with him?

This kind of self—discovering process, caused by ambiguity of symbolism, affects the reader’s mind along with ambiguity of path. The third kind of ambiguity, ambiguity of meaning, can also be used to tug on the reader’s subconscious. However, it is usually undesirable to attempt to use it outside of a poetic style.

The reason to be cautious about ambiguity of meaning is that there is a common conceit in fiction, shared between reader and writer, that her prose is a clear window into the world of the story. When the author hides conflicting interpretations in grammar, she disrupts that conceit. The reader suddenly finds himself looking *at* the window rather

than through it.

I once read a fantasy novel where, in the climactic battle, one of the major heroes was locked in a death-struggle with a hated, minor villain. Unfortunately, because of a glitch in the grammar, it was unclear at the last moment who had sliced open the throat of whom.

I certainly had conflicting interpretations, and I certainly did care which was true, but I didn't have a sense of my own inner desires being illuminated so much as frustration at being left in the dark. I had to wade through a few more pages before I was finally sure that the hero had won and the villain was dead, at which point the satisfaction of knowing this fact was weaker than it might have been.

As with so much else in life, there is a balance to be struck. Too much certainty in the language makes the prose bloated, the reader no longer free to interpret, and the writer no longer able to pack worlds of meaning into a few words. However, leave too much out and there is nothing to keep the reader engaged and guide him out of the familiar. He is left in his own company, and the vague muttering of the prose in his head only makes him more aware of it.

Accordingly, prose should be *concise*, communicating the intended meaning as fully as possible in as few words as possible. Doing this consistently is the essence of good style, requiring decades of reading and writing to develop and fully mature. It is fortunate for me that the problem of good style is beyond the scope of this short book. What is important, for our purposes, is that good style cuts down on *ineffective* ambiguity. This frees the reader to apply his mind to the important, intended ambiguities that guide him further into the world of the story.

The usual caveats apply: the writer cannot control what the reader will make of the material she gives to him. Indeed, the more deeply the story manages to shake the reader, the less predictable the outcome will be. But the framework we have made so far allows us to make progress in two areas: how to shake the reader deeply, and how to shake him in the right direction.

This is a good time to move from the "influencing" frame of writing and consider things from the "teaching" frame. As we observed at the conclusion of chapter one, writing is very similar to teaching. This is even true genetically: the first storytellers were the

memorizers of myths, of sacred histories, which they would pass on from generation to generation. These myths encoded not only the tribe's past but also its values and its knowledge of the world.

The modern storyteller is engaged in a similar task. This is true whether she sets out to keep her cultural tradition alive by reciting it in a new context, or to subvert and destroy aspects of her culture that she sees as wrong, or even if she sets out with the dream of founding a new tradition. At a deeper level than the mundane metrics of sales and reviews, her task is to teach.

As writers, we can teach by telling or teach by challenging. Art has extraordinary power to teach by challenging, to prod readers into searching for new answers within themselves. In teaching by telling, however, art has no advantages (and several disadvantages) over an essay, textbook, or lecture.

When we create tension in a story, the way in which that tension is resolved will show the reader something about their world. What that is depends on their interpretive process, but it also depends on how deeply and honestly we delve into ourselves as we write; for every story we tell is to some degree the story of ourselves, and it is only because of the deep resemblances between humans, as readers and as writers, that we are able to share anything at all.

Chapter 4: Questions

Let's review the key concepts we've explored so far. As the reader absorbs a work, he forms an evolving interpretation that goes beyond the explicit content. His mind fills the blank spaces of the story with his own thoughts, thoughts that spill out in streams of association to mingle with the currents of his subconscious world. This concourse of waters is agitated by tension: ambiguity of path, combined with the reader's desire to see one path fulfilled over all the others.

This scene hints at the ways a story can leave an enduring mark on its reader. But to really make explicit how stories wield influence beyond themselves, there is one last aspect of art that we must consider: the narrative question.

There are many purposes a question may serve. It may simply be an invitation to recall something from memory. It may be a challenge, inviting us to connect information we already know in a way it has not been connected before. Some questions linger long after they are asked, even to the point of defining a person's life.

The relationship of a story to its question is an interesting one. A story does not simply *ask* a question: it puts it into the reader's mind. A good story makes *you* ask its most profound question.

To understand how, recall from the previous chapter how every element of tension in a story depends on an unknown. When King Arthur sets out to find the holy grail, what is unknown is his ultimate fate: whether he will succeed or fail; whether the grail is real or mere empty fable. This unknown at the center of Arthur's quest is an example of what is known as a "dramatic question".

"Will they or won't they?"

"Can the dashing highwayman make it out of this one?"

"Who will win the coveted Golden Blueberry at the Sunny Valley Bake Sale?"

A dramatic question has two ingredients: an unknown outcome, and a reader who wants to know what that outcome is. Over the course of a story, the reader usually sees their

dramatic question answered. Even if it is not answered, the end of the story resolves the underlying tension: there are no more words to tug at the reader's sympathies and desires to sustain the feeling, so the reader is finally able to resolve things for himself.

But even when the dramatic question is resolved, there remains an enduring mark on the reader's mind. Beneath the dramatic question, another, deeper question lies hidden. By internalizing the story's tension, the reader has brought it into the company of the tensions in his own life. He has re-experienced his own struggles in the experience of the characters. By doing this, he has created what we call a "shadow question": a deeper, more general question about real experience that the story itself cannot answer.

"Is love real?"

"Does dishonesty pay?"

"In baking, is true excellence ever given its due?"

And, of course, "Why do we desire grails: sacred, ideal things? Is it wise, in seeking them, to risk everything you have?"

A story's effectiveness is deeply linked to its ability to pose dramatic questions that open shadow questions in the reader's mind. Through the shadow question, the story becomes an analogy to the uncertainties of the reader's own real life. At that point, its influence on him is assured.

Let's consider how this can work in practice. We imagine writing a book with intention of undermining faith in monarchy. The book portrays a bumbling king who makes and repeals laws at a whim, loudly and widely flaunts his staggering ignorance, and mocks all values that his people hold sacred. All of this he does with the stern, steady support of the police and the generals. Responding to criticism, they only insist on the paramount importance of rule of law and respect for the divine right of kings.

Perhaps this book achieves an impact. Perhaps it seizes the attention of people on the fence about monarchy, galvanizes the anti-monarchists, weakens the will of the traditionalists to defend their point of view in the marketplace. If it does this, it's because it planted in all these people's hearts a common question, which may be phrased as: "Who can protect us from an all-powerful fool?"

That, in a nutshell, is the path of the reader.

But what about the writer?

How does she make that crucial step, from intention to an idea for a story? Sometimes the answer to this question is so natural that it does not need to even be asked. But when the next step in the process of storytelling does not feel natural and her intuition does not point her clearly to a single route, that is when she must fall back on some kind of conscious method to get her unstuck.

The method is this: the writer starts with the story she is moved to tell. When unsure how best to tell it, she considers the effect she wants to have on her ideal reader. When unsure how to produce that effect, she considers the question she wants to pose. If she doesn't have any of these, she can simply begin by telling her audience something important, and let the question come from that.

To put it another way: knowing what to say, she says it; uncertain of what to say, she considers her intended effect; unsure of that effect, she refers to the underlying question. The question is the deepest foundation of her project. When things are going smoothly for her, it stays out of the way, as a foundation should. When she comes to a decision point with no clear way forward, that's when she can refer back to the effect, and ask: what choice would tug the hardest on the reader, in the direction I want him to go? And if even that doesn't yield a decision, if she doesn't know what direction she is now trying to pull the reader, then she can look at her question and figure out what effect will lead the reader to ask it.

If the writer has a question, then it is possible for her to begin writing even without a story to tell: she can form the story out of tensions that pose the question. It will become clearer how she might do this in the case study of the next chapter.

A question is at the heart of every effective story. A story that does not raise any questions cannot fulfil its potential of transforming its readers.

Let's compare this last statement, of the necessity of questions, to the premise I started out with. I framed this book as a guide to *effective* creative writing; yet here at the core of my theory I have cast the *shadow question* of art as more fundamental than the effect itself.

So, which is it?

Which is more valuable to storytelling, the effect a story has or the question it asks? Is there a contradiction here?

In fact, these turn out to be two inseparable parts of the same fundamental pattern. It comes down to the distinction I made at the end of Chapter One, between the "influencing" and "sharing" perspectives on doing things with words. An influencer begins with the effect in mind, but doesn't fret too much if she fails to ask a clear question. Meanwhile, a sharer, beneath the texture of experience that she seeks to share, communicates her *uncertainty*, the sense of mystery around her chosen topic.

Inevitably, any artistic work will both create effects and pose questions. The reader who is moved will ask himself what happened; the reader who is compelled to ask a question will change in the pondering of that question. Hence artists of the "influencing" and "sharing" temperament are not so different: both, if successful, will create art that to some degree surprises and confounds their audience. What separates them is the emphasis of their respective goals. The first will seek to have a specific impact, the second to tell a specific truth.

The distinction is still important because there is a kind of uncertainty principle at play here. If I am sure what effect I will have, for this certainty I must usually sacrifice certainty in what questions I will lead the reader to ask; and if I am sure what I will make the reader ask, I must usually sacrifice certainty as to the answers he will supply for that question, and how those answers will shift his opinions.

For example: if I want to have a very specific influence, say, advocating for nuclear power, I will naturally have to pose a very specific question that leads to my specific intended effect. (For example: "Why the stigma, when the harm per kilowatt hour is so much smaller than the leading alternatives?") But in the process of leading readers down that narrow path, they are sure to consider other questions that I did not intend. My leading question will bore them and they will seek out various, unintended paths through my story.

On the flip side, if I want to portray a very specific experience—let's say a moment of my life when, considering my past and future and the world around me, I looked out from the deck of a cruise ship on a clear warm night across the Nile to the lights of Luxor beyond—I have very little control over how the uncertainties of the experience I portray

will go on to impact the reader. If the scene is compelling enough, the mystery will sink into the depths of the reader's mind. There it will have all sorts of effects. It will change how he perceives the world, what he notices about events and people, and ultimately even what choices he makes and how he lives the rest of his life. But I, as the writer, will never know the details of that shift.

Another way of putting this is: as a teacher, I may ask questions I have an answer to, or questions I do not. If I ask questions and point the students to the answers, I am more like a writer with the influencer temperament. If I ask questions simply so others may ponder them, I am a sharer.

Which kind of certainty is more important depends on the goals and values of the writer. Of course, these may change in the process of writing. A writer wears many hats during the lifecycle of a book, and at one stage she may be more interested in influencing readers than she is at another. The end result will bear marks of the writer's intention from every stage in the process.

There is another dimension to storytelling that I have largely left out. Both "influencing" and "sharing" operate by offering questions but not the answers. This is writing by *connotation*. One can also write by *denotation*. In other words, one can "just say it". One can provide the question *and* the answer, or even an answer without any mention of a question.

I sympathize with the writer who would rather get the point across by "just saying it". It is, after all, what humans invented language to do; and, in spite of the important role of connotation both in art and in casual communication, on matters of great importance denotation is usually what we prefer.

Consider the process we've laid out over these chapters:

1. Make the reader care
2. Pose a dramatic question…
3. That then exposes a shadow question
4. Answer the dramatic question
5. Finally, influence the reader by inviting them to ponder the shadow question behind the dramatic question.

This may sound like a daunting feat of psychological engineering. Having studied this idea, the writer may be consider the alternative approach of *just coming right out with what she intends to say*, and put her message directly into her book, whether as narration or as a monologue from some character.

In the next chapter, we'll see that influencing by questions is not as complicated as it sounds. It is true that making the point explicit is easier, and if the writer is more concerned with speed than technique she may find it necessary to choose that path.

As a rule, I advise against directly stating your thesis in a creative work. It undermines the "magic circle" of fiction. If the writer takes over a character with her own voice, the reader is forced either to interpret it as just another opinion (in which case the denotation fails) or to interpret the voice as coming from *outside* the fictional world. This strikes a fracture into the world of the story and naturally makes it function less well as a story, even if the thesis itself is well-argued.

There are other genres where straight denotation is much more welcome, including the genre of this very book. But in creative writing, frequent denotation too often becomes a crutch that prevents the writer from unlocking the full potential of her art, the potential her art has to transcend the limitations of everyday thinking. The ambiguity of fiction is a necessary part of its value to us: it releases us from the cage of what we think are our beliefs, taking us to a freer world where our minds can change their shape.

End of sample

You've read to the end of How to Do Things With Stories, the free sample.

You can grab the full book at https://leanpub.com/dothingswithstories. The full book is also available for free, on a pay-what-you-want basis.

The later chapters include:

- A hands-on case study where we build a story from scratch, shaped for an intended effect ("The Minnesota Snowbirds")
- Lessons on how story structure relates to effectiveness and memorability ("Story Structure")
- Advice on the role of absurdity in fictional stories ("When to Make Sense")
- Tips for how to apply all this advice at the level of word choice and grammar ("Style")

Whether or not you choose to continue on from here, I want to hear your feedback on what you have read so far. Please share your thoughts through the form at this URL: https://forms.gle/pfzteWaRB9NsQtUM6

If you prefer, contact me directly at twitter.com/MattiasInSpace.

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