



the
MAGIC
of fiction

CRAFTING WORDS
INTO STORY

The Writer's Guide
to Writing & Editing

BETH HILL

The Magic of Fiction: Crafting Words into Story

The Writer's Guide to Writing & Editing

BETH HILL

*For DLB and CAS,
to fulfill a promise made too many years ago*

Copyright

Copyright © 2015 by Beth Hill

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means whatsoever without express written permission from the author. The exception would be brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the author assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained herein.

The copyright continues on the next page.

Contents

Introduction

Why This Book

Part One

Getting Started

- 1 The Magic of Fiction
- 2 What You Should Know Before You Start
- 3 The First Draft
- 4 Rewriting, Editing, or Proofreading?

Part Two

Major Elements of Fiction

- 5 Verifying Viewpoint: Affirming Point of View
- 6 Narrative Tense: What Happens When?
- 7 Shaping Characters
- 8 Creating Emotion in the Reader
- 9 Inspecting Plot: Does Anything Happen?
- 10 Showcasing the Setting
- 11 Crafting Conflict
- 12 Dialogue that Doesn't Stink

- 13 Setting and Breaking the Pace
- 14 Tone & Mood: Getting Them Right
- 15 Exploring Exposition
- 16 Refining Style
- 17 Dealing with Description
- 18 Genre Expectations

Part Three

Major Story Sections

- 19 More Than Humble Beginnings
- 20 Significant Introductions
- 21 Shore Up Sagging, Soggy Middles
- 22 Endings that Rock
- 23 Notable Story Moments
- 24 Verify the Presence of Scenes

Part Four

Getting Specific: A Few Detailed Details

- 25 Punctuation in Dialogue
- 26 Numbers in Fiction
- 27 Grammar & Punctuation & Spelling, Oh My!
- 28 Common Mistakes and Their Fixes

Part Five

Style Issues: Little Details, Big Effects

- 29 Examining Word Choices
- 30 Cut the Flab, Pump up the Lean
- 31 Mute Your Message
- 32 Weed Out Author Intrusion
- 33 Be a Miser with Your Words
- 34 The Name Game

Part Six

Focus on Editing

- 35 Search for Mistakes
- 36 Working Through the Text
- 37 The Super-Simple Stuff
- 38 The Editing Checklist
- 39 Editing Checklist: The Short Version
- 40 Editing Checklist: The Ultrashort Version
- 41 Tips for Proofing
- 42 The Don'ts

Part Seven

Putting it All Together

43 Keep the Reader in Mind

44 Write for the Characters, Edit for the Readers

45 That One Other Thing

46 Play Up Your Strengths

47 Flouting the Rules, Flaunting Your Style

48 Exceptions

49 Talk to Yourself: Ask Some Questions

50 Smoothing out the Big Picture

51 Knowing When the Story is Finished

52 Final Thoughts

My Style Sheet

Hedge Words & Filter Words

Introduction

Why This Book

SO WHY A FICTION-WRITING HANDBOOK with a decided emphasis on editing? The simple answer: I see a need.

You can find many fabulous books on writing, at least on certain aspects of the craft. And you can find resources that cover some facets of rewriting. But there aren't many books easily accessible to all writers that address each of the fiction elements and major sections of a story, at least not with an orientation toward reworking and perfecting those elements, not with the objective of helping writers learn how to edit those elements.

Writers deserve more than an introduction to the fiction elements. Knowledge of how to rewrite and edit, knowing why rewriting and editing are crucial, is information every fiction writer should have.

Learning how to work the craft shouldn't be restricted to writers who attend writing programs or workshops. All writers should have access to writing tips and strategies useful to not only complete a first draft, but to change a first draft into a polished piece of fiction.

This knowledge is especially important for writers intending to self-publish. If writers are going to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as agents and editors, they need a few extra resources to help them put together the best stories possible.

With e-publishing making the opportunity to self-publish relatively simple for writers, more writers than ever are taking their stories directly to the public. And those stories often don't get the editing attention that traditionally published books get.

Self-published books (e-books and print books) shouldn't be shorted the opportunity of a good edit. But if you eliminate the traditional publisher, you also eliminate many of the tasks performed by the publishing company, including editing and proofing. All novels should be edited; they deserve the attention. Even more so when you consider what they face in the marketplace.

Writers with drawers full of manuscripts are pulling those manuscripts out and, for a relatively few dollars, they're getting them up on the Internet without a publisher's help or guidance or backing.

And some of those manuscripts are no doubt written by popular authors, which means not only a glut of self-published books, but self-published books from authors that readers are likely to gravitate to first.

That's a lot of competition for new books from untried writers. And a big inducement to get it right.

And for the known author, the need to produce books that compare with those vetted by a publishing house is a need just as crucial.

The opportunities for self-publishing make knowing how to rewrite and edit manuscripts, how to form them into entertaining books, essential skills for all writers.

EXPECTATIONS

While I'm not going to delve into the sales statistics of self-published books (often e-books, but print books as well) of an unknown author, I will remind you that for most writers, the number of sales is low. Very low. Extremely low.

Yes, a few unknown authors hit it big. And we're all encouraged when one does. There's no doubt that some self-published books are fantastic and even more entertaining than books vetted and published in the traditional manner. But those big, big sales are still rare. Maybe that will change as self-publishing continues to evolve, but don't count on it. Not for your first effort. Especially if you don't have an established name or reputation.

You're still one writer among thousands, among many thousands. And those thousands all have the same idea—to be a best-selling author. So with self-publishing increasingly popular, how many more novels enter the marketplace every year?

You can do the math: thousands of new stories to vie for the attention of readers.

Will the number of readers go up? Maybe. Will readers buy more books if the cost is lower or if they can download directly in their homes and work places, while in their cars or sitting on the beach? Again, maybe.

So more readers may be looking for more books. But *you* still have to do something to make your books stand out.

To get noticed, you can set up an eye-popping web presence with a website and a blog and blog tours and membership in different online groups. And you'll probably want to explore all these options, maybe try a marketing or publicity approach that

no one else has explored. You'll want to try whatever is working for other writers and devise your own methods for introducing yourself and your books to an audience.

I'm not a publicist or marketing expert, but I am an editor of fiction, and I can suggest another way to make your stories rise to the attention of readers:

Write an entertaining story in a recognizable genre that takes readers on an engaging journey into a captivating world in the company of fascinating characters, and tap into reader emotions while you're doing it.

Give readers a good story well told.

Sound familiar? Yes, that part is no different from what good writers have always done. It was true for Mark Twain and it was true for writers before his day and it'll be true for writers for the foreseeable future: you've got to have an entertaining story and you've got to tell it well.

Readers want good fiction. *Believable* fiction. And they don't want to be reminded that they're merely reading—they want to imagine they're living the adventure your characters are living. Or at least imagine that the adventure could be possible.

They want to see and touch your worlds, feel your characters' emotions. They want more than static words on a page or screen. They want color and motion and emotion and action and conflict. They want ups and downs, highs and lows. And they want satisfaction when they reach the end. They want something that they can't get in their jobs or hobbies or sports. They want what only fiction provides.

Can you deliver for them? Can you write an entertaining story that locks readers inside a fictional world and can you make that world real? Can you touch the emotions of your readers? Can you *manipulate* the emotions of your readers? Can you write such a compelling story that *from page 1 to the end*, readers are not once distracted by the mechanics or the foundations of the story but only caught up in the trials, ordeals, and victories of your characters?

Can you make your readers yearn for your fictional world as if it were a tangible place where they can taste the foods and walk the streets and defeat the bad guy or fall in love?

I intend to give you help to do just that.

Easy access to self-publishing is going to be around a while, at least until the next evolution in publishing, so why not try self-publishing? At the same time, why not give yourself every advantage?

Even if you intend to pursue the traditional route to publishing, you should make your stories as strong as possible, as flawless as possible. No, agents and publishers won't reject your story simply because it's got a few errors. But they might reject a story that isn't as tight as it could be, one that shows weaknesses in one or more of the major fiction elements. Show off your stories by increasing your skills.

Tips for rewriting and self-editing should give you a leg up. If not that, how about a toehold? At the least, editing advice will put you ahead of where you were before, with manuscripts hidden away, too frightened to show themselves in public.

My intent is to light a fire under you, one to match the fire inside you, a fervent flame that'll have you not only rewriting and editing, but impatient to write and publish even more stories.

FICTION BASICS AND BENCHMARKS

I can't distill every bit of writing and editing wisdom and fold it into this book any more than a tech writer could put all there is to know about computing inside a single book. There are too many issues and permutations and possible digressions.

I do want to give you the basics and more. I also want to share suggestions for areas you might not have considered. And I want to get you thinking about options, about writing elements or areas of fiction that you might know nothing about.

It's difficult to know what's wrong with a section of text without a means of comparison, without a benchmark. That is, to see how and where a story or any one element is off track, you have to know where the story should be at any given time and where it's ultimately headed. You need to know the elements of fiction, their purposes and how they fit with other elements, and know how to manipulate the elements to create intended effects and strong stories.

So in *The Magic of Fiction* you'll find plenty of information concerning the fiction elements—what each should accomplish and ways to achieve those ends—enough to enable you to compare the particulars of your manuscript with basic standards.

And while this book is primarily a resource for fiction writers, any writer or editor can benefit from the suggestions, tips, and examples you'll find here.

Use the recommendations to make your manuscripts irresistible to readers, whether those readers are fans and critics or agents and publishers.

Don't be surprised to come across the most basic topics and suggestions or, conversely, topics you've never heard of. By necessity, this is a book for any fiction writer at any level. And *that* means that some of the suggestions here will be familiar to you, something you learned in middle school or in college or in your writing group. But a lot of this material is going to be new to a great many writers, writers who've never formally studied writing or literature or fiction. New to the man who's dreamed all his life of writing but who's been working 70 hours a week for 25 years building and growing his own business. New to the woman who devours mysteries and finds she has an engaging character in mind for a mystery series, one she knows she could write. New to the recent college graduate

Chapter One

The Magic of Fiction

Creating a world, populating it with people, designing laws for that world and then dreaming up dramatic dilemmas to bedevil the people of that world, that's magic. Or sorcery. Or it's the unique gift of the fiction writer who, armed with only his imagination, a mind full of words, and a few tools, builds stories out of nothing.

Writing fiction—entertaining fiction that keeps readers enthralled—isn't magic of the unexplained kind. It's the magic of our practiced magician.

Crafting story out of the void is a marvel, yet no sleight of hand is involved. Fiction that can stand up to readers isn't the product of false magic. No, this is the real thing. It's the creation of a reality where previously nothing else existed.

And it's powerful, this fiction magic.

It not only creates people and worlds, but when it's manipulated just right, it has real people living the adventures of the created people. It has real-world humans *seeing* imaginary events, empathizing with imagined people, and feeling *real* emotions.

If that's not potent magic—touching and moving people through the power of words—then I don't know what it should be called.

There is a force in words. They create. They direct. They influence.

And this is no less true of words in fiction than for words written for any other purpose.

You can work fiction magic by writing, rewriting, and editing. You can create worlds from nothing. You can influence readers.

You can produce extraordinary fictional phenomena.

The Magic of Fiction is one more tool to help you create believable fictional worlds, fascinating characters, and entertaining stories.

- It's a handbook for the writer just starting out, the writer unfamiliar with all the fiction elements and their purposes, unfamiliar with revision and the need for self-editing.

- It's a guide for the writer who wants to perfect her stories before submitting them to agents and publishers.
- It's a manual for the writer who intends to self-publish, whose stories may never be touched by a professional editor.
- It's a how-to for the writing student eager to learn how to piece together a work of long fiction.
- It's a resource for the educator who needs a comprehensive guide for the classroom.
- It's a primer for the beginning editor learning new skills.
- It's a review for editors who want a refresher.

This book focuses not solely on the creation of a story but on the development of that story through revisions and editing, from draft to edited masterpiece.

Multiple writers have been credited with saying some variation of *all writing is rewriting*. Many have said something similar because rewriting is what produces the end product, a satisfying novel that can transport readers to new worlds, introducing them to new people, without causing them to trip over confusing sentences and grammar or oddities that don't belong in the fictional world.

It's in the manipulation of words and the fiction elements—it's in change and revision—that powerful story is created.

My intention is to provide you with ways to work and rework your story—write, rewrite, and polish words and phrases, the fiction elements (including characters, plot, and dialogue), and large sections of text (including first pages, scenes, and the climax)—until you've created a story world and characters that can support the scrutiny of real-world readers.

Because so much of the craft of writing fiction deals with rewriting and editing, we're not going to leave off after the creation of the first draft. Actually, that will be our start point and not the end point.

We're going to cover the major fiction elements and writing practices all the way through the completion of a novel (or any piece of long fiction). We're going to make sure you have strategies and tips and a mindset for completing every necessary component of your stories.

Work and rework your fiction. Craft words into stories and stories into powerful moments that resonate with readers.

Touch real-world people with the power of your words.

Create fiction magic.

Chapter Seven

Shaping Characters

CHARACTERS, PLOT, AND SETTING are the three support legs your stories are built on.

A novel needs all three legs to be strong and steady; otherwise, your novel won't stand. Stories must take place somewhere, involve at least one character, and have a plot.

Even plot-first stories, as many genre novels are, need characters. And every character-first novel, as many literary novels are, needs events related by cause and effect, which is the plot. Both styles of stories must take place somewhere and that setting—place and time and all that goes with them—can have a dynamic effect on both characters and plot. Setting can also influence tone, mood, and emotion.

Let's look at character as an editor might, to see if you've covered the relevant story issues relating to character.

CHARACTERS MUST HAVE A REASON TO LIVE

Characters are the drivers of action in story. They act and others react. They speak, and other characters respond. They have goals and agendas and want what *they* want, often uncaring of what others want or need.

Each must have a purpose in your story and in the scenes in which they find themselves.

If a character isn't needed to advance the plot or to influence other characters or to be an important element of setting, why is he hanging around a scene?

Make sure characters have overall purposes as well as scene purposes. Make sure they have enough to do to justify inclusion in your story.

Your main characters—protagonist(s), antagonist, hero and heroine, the protagonist's best friend, and anyone who appears on the page frequently—have to

appeal to the reader. Not necessarily appeal in such a way that readers *like* them, but appeal enough that readers are eager—or willing—to spend a lot of time with them.

Readers typically root for the protagonist and hope to see the antagonist defeated. That's not always the case, but it happens much of the time. Have you given readers reasons to root for the protagonist? Is the character a sympathetic one? Have you given readers reasons to care? Not necessarily care for him but care that he gets what he wants?

Have you given readers reasons to hope the antagonist is soundly defeated? Defeated but redeemed? Maybe simply redeemed?

Can you point to sections in the text where you've done this, where you've made a character's needs important to the reader? There should be multiple passages in the story where you've revealed a character's personality in such a way that he or she draws empathy or dislike from readers. Giving readers one line—*Ricky saved a drowning puppy when he was fifteen*—isn't sufficient to establish a baseline for sympathy or for dislike. Not in a 350-page novel.

You wouldn't want to overdo either, hammering a character's traits and quirks into the reader. But if you want readers to feel for your characters, positively or negatively, you've got to show those characters in action (action can include thinking and speaking), doing deeds that will draw or repulse readers, and you need to reveal character personality more than once.

You also need to allow readers to draw conclusions about characters, not have them merely read *Ricky was a good man*. Readers need to experience Ricky as a good man and Greg as a sneaky one and Tina as a penny-pincher. A character's personality will become real to a reader as personality characteristics are made real on the page, through action, dialogue, the thoughts of other characters, and the thoughts of the characters themselves. And when readers draw conclusions about a character, those conclusions will become a part of the reader's ties to the story. They'll become part of the reading experience. And then the story becomes real.

CHARACTERS MUST FIT

Your story people must fit your story world. That means a fit to genre and setting and plot. Characters must also fit one another.

If you've written a historical, do characters treat one another as men and women of the era would? Do they know what people of that age would know? Characters of earlier ages may know a lot more about hunting or plants than many people do

today. They may know something of the English court and its intricacies. They may know the stars.

On the other hand, they may know little of people from other lands, may have never heard of an ocean, never traveled more than a few miles from their birthplaces.

Make sure your characters don't know more, or less, than they should.

Make sure you haven't given them the sensibilities of a man or woman of a different age.

When editing, make changes if characters sound like people out of their era or if a character has knowledge he couldn't or wouldn't have. If a character's background and experiences don't give her a way to know how to hack a computer, she's not going to be able to break into a programmer's files in twenty seconds.

Make sure characters don't destroy the suspension of disbelief by displaying knowledge or skills they couldn't or don't possess.

CHARACTERS MUST BE DIFFERENT

Your characters should be different from one another in both major and minor ways.

They think differently and move differently. They approach problems from different perspectives. They have different life experiences and motivations.

Make sure characters sound different and act in ways that distinguish them from one another. If two characters can't be differentiated, one might need to be cut from the story. At the very least, one needs to change.

(MAJOR) CHARACTERS MUST BE MOTIVATED

Give characters their own motivations. For example, the reason Burton wants to find the treasure—find it himself, not merely be on the team that discovers it—should be different from his brother's reason. What gets him involved in the hunt is different from what drives his brother.

While every character may give in on some matters, each may possess a single

Chapter Ten

Showcasing the Setting

SETTING DETAILS SET your story apart, apart from every other story (including your own), apart from movies, apart from real locations. They establish place and time and can influence mood. Setting details can very quickly, from page 1, set up reader expectations and influence reader emotions.

Setting showcases your characters, both their strengths and weaknesses. Setting can reveal character traits as well as shape your character.

A love story or mystery can take place anywhere and at any time. *Your* love story is different because it's set in Gallipoli just before the Crimean War. Or in pre-Civil War New Orleans. Or on Palzar, the fourth moon of Rak'ar in the year 2602.

Your mystery is unique because it takes place in Edwardian London or on a space station that's the last outpost at the edge of a wormhole.

And the particulars of those places and times should influence, even saturate, your story.

Place, time, and cultural events should make stories different. They should influence characters. A setting should be so tied to a story that to change the setting would be to change the story.

And as you edit, you may need to do exactly that—change your setting. Your first choice of setting may not be the best one for your story. If you switched the year—to just before or during or just after a major event or upheaval—would you have a stronger story? Would you give protagonist and antagonist more ammunition?

What of the era in general? Have you used the one most beneficial to your fiction? Can enough happen in that time period? Do the characters of that age or era hold the proper opinions, the mindset, for what you need from them?

What of seasons or weather? Have you chosen the best for your needs? What would happen if you started the story three months earlier or six months later? Could you work in more challenges for the characters if the conditions were cold and snowy? Hot and humid? If it was the rainy season? The dry season? Hurricane season?

If you've featured holidays in your book, could you have used a more emotion-laden one if you'd begun the events of the story in a different month?

What of the political climate? How are characters affected by local, national, or world events? Do national or international events speed up your fictional timelines and deadlines? Have you taken advantage of your locale and its singular elements?

Your broad setting may not change much—for example, your story may take place in a small city in Florida. But characters move from one room to another, one building to another, from downtown to the beach. And the smaller settings should fit the larger setting as well as fit the events that take place within them.

The larger settings can also change, of course. The setting itself may be changed by story events, by something such as war or large-scale weather events. Or characters may leave one setting and enter another. Whatever the reason for changes in setting, make sure they don't pass unnoticed, not if characters should notice the change.

SETTING IN GENERAL

I can keep asking questions to help you focus on the particulars of your setting, help you determine if it's the best setting for your story's needs and whether or not you've used the strongest setting elements, but let's first look at the basics and the components of setting.

Setting details should show up in the opening pages. These details give readers a sense of time and place and give characters a stage on which to move and speak.

If the setting changes with a scene or chapter break, make sure readers know the new setting right away (this is critical if you change time or place). Unless you want to confuse readers on purpose, orient them to a new setting or to changes in an existing setting at the top of a scene.

You can also set up setting markers for one scene at the end of an earlier scene. All it takes are references to time, place, and a future event. When a subsequent scene opens at that event, readers already know when and where the scene takes place. So the end of one scene might include a line such as this: *"I'll see you Thursday afternoon at the lawyer's office."* And the beginning of the new scene might be: *I strolled into the offices of Dexter, Kelsey, and Pratt wearing my faux detachment.*

You'll also want to employ sense elements as part of your setting detail and have characters interact with setting props. And you'll want to make sure that setting fits genre. A mismatch between setting and genre will put the story off balance right

from the start. If that's your intention, you have some leeway. But since setting is such an easy way to accentuate genre, get accentuating.

Determine whether characters fit the setting or stand out against it. If characters don't mesh with your setting, consider a new locale or different time period.

A change in setting may be the answer to a ho-hum, predictable novel.

A different setting may help solve a lack of tension and conflict. Fish-out-of-water stories can set character and reader nerves jangling right from the story's start. Maybe you need to take your characters out of their fishpond and give them a highly unfamiliar place to play.

Make sure you've included details appropriate for the scene, the characters, and the action. When characters *can* notice more, let them notice more. When they're racing quickly from place to place, they won't be engaged in much noticing unless they're searching for something or a setting element stands out (or is tripped over).

When the location changes from scene to scene, be sure you've included details that make the new locale different. When characters return to a locale they've already been in, there's no need to repaint the scene. When you edit, cut out setting description that's already been established. If setting details have changed, however, make sure those new details are made known. Also point out details that one character might notice that others wouldn't, especially if one character is new to the location.

Let's look at a list of the major categories of setting. Use this list to ensure that you've included setting details and done so in a variety of ways. Use the list to ensure that your story doesn't go too long without additional references to setting.

As you edit, keep in mind that some genres may lean more heavily on one setting component than on others. Make sure you've included the kinds of references to setting that readers expect in your story's genre. Yet you'll want to make sure that you've covered all the relevant setting details, not only the major ones. And remember that time and place are always significant since they frame characters

The preview ends here