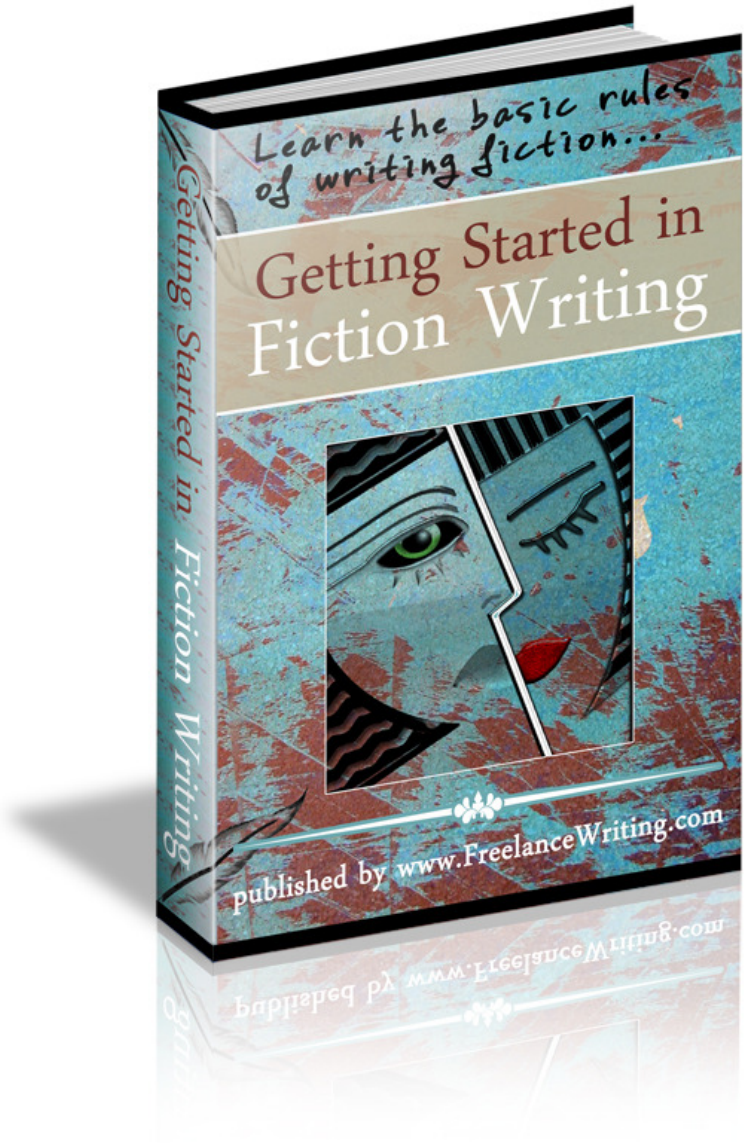

published by http://www.FreelanceWriting.com

LEGAL NOTICE:

The Publisher has strived to be as accurate and complete as possible in the creation of this ebook, notwithstanding the fact that he does not warrant or represent at any time that the contents within are accurate due to the rapidly changing nature of the Internet.

While all attempts have been made to verify information provided in this publication, the Publisher assumes no responsibility for errors, omissions, or contrary interpretation of the subject matter herein. Any perceived slights of specific persons, peoples, or organizations are unintentional.

In practical advice books, like anything else in life, there are no guarantees of income made or improvement of skill. Readers are cautioned to reply on their own judgment about their individual circumstances to act accordingly.

This book is not intended for use as a source of legal, business, accounting or financial advice. All readers are advised to seek services of competent professionals in legal, business, accounting, and finance field.

We encourage you to save or print this book for easy reading.

For more FREE e-books on writing and freelancing, visit
http://www.freelancewriting.com/ebooks-for-writers.php

1.
What is fiction?

Essentially, fiction is narrative and all narrative tells about changes taking place in time. Fiction is not necessarily untrue; historical fiction may be quite true, perhaps more fully true than history itself.

A second characteristic of fiction is that its chief concern is not with what happens, but with what happens to somebody. It is narrative that centers around a personality.

Finally, most good fiction is descriptive. Poor writers believe that simply telling a story, without trying to make the reader see the action, constitutes good fiction. Pick up any magazines of confession, and notice what an overwhelming percentage of each of its stories consists of recounting the incidents without a particle of imagination to enliven the account. **Here is an example:**

My friend went inside to phone a few more guys in his effort to get an escort for me, and I waited outside with his "date." When he came out, I knew that he had failed. I figured there was no use in my spoiling his time for the evening; so I told the two to go ahead without me. I said that I wasn't feeling very well, and that I thought I would go home and get some rest. He was very happy and polite, but finally I persuaded him to take me to my apartment, where he left me with a promise to call the next night.

Compare this bare account of happenings with a truly imaginative bit of writing from the great writer Robert Louis Stevenson:

All three peered covertly at the gamester. He did not seem to be enjoying his luck. His mouth was a little to a side; one nostril nearly shut, and the other much inflated. The black dog was on his back, as people say, in terrifying nursery metaphor; and he breathed hard under the gruesome burden.

"He looks as if he could knife him," whispered Tabary, with round eyes.

The monk shuddered, and turned his face and spread his open hands to the red embers. It was the cold that thus affected Dom Nicholas, and not any excess of moral sensibility.

"Come now," said Villon "about this ballade. How does it run so far?" And beating time with his hand, he read it aloud to Tabary.

The first of these passages tells what happened, whereas the second makes us see what happened. The first creates no images; the second, filled with images, is literally imaginative.

Fiction, then, is of two sorts: one we can call non-imaginative, and the second we can call imaginative. In this book we will disregard the first sort completely, and concentrate on the second one. For our purposes, fiction should be imaginative narrative.

2.
Imaginative Narrative

Short stories, novels, and dramas are all alike in being scenic; that is, the writer has created a series of scenes imaginatively with short passages of necessary exposition between scenes. When the fiction writer has learned this elementary law, and has learned how to abide by it in his own work, half his task toward writing good fiction is done.

An examination of any well-written piece of fiction will reveal that it is made up of scenes — sometimes one or two — as in some of Edgar Allan Poe's stories; sometimes several, as in dramas; and sometimes a great many, as in novels and most short stories.

The intervals between scenes are passed over, as we suggested above, with the least possible fuss—sometimes with a simple skipping of a line; sometimes with a row of asterisks; sometimes with a new chapter heading; sometimes with a few transitional phrases (such as, "*On the following day . . .*"; "*It was three months later that . . .*"; "*He met her on the street a week later . . .*"; and so on); and sometimes with a brief expository passage conveying necessary information.

3.
Drama

In this book we will not consider drama separately from other fiction. Drama differs from other forms of fiction only in the limitations imposed by the physical restrictions of the stage and the theater. The principal limitations are these:

a. Intervals between scenes are indicated in the program in the hands of the audience.

b. Necessary explanation must appear either in the program or in the dialogue of the actors on the stage.

c. The number of scenes must be limited so that scene-shifting will not be too frequent or too costly, and so that the total number of scenes will not hold audiences in their seats for more than two or three hours.

d. The nature of the scenes is determined by the physical restrictions of the stage; for example:

1) an airplane battle could not be presented on the stage —
2) nor could psychological changes which do not affect the actions of a character —
3) nor could stories which hinge on meaningful looks passed between characters —
4) nor could very short scenes which would not be worth the trouble of scene-shifting —

5) nor could stories in which animals or very small children act or think, and so on.

Reason and experience assist a writer in determining if a story is dramatic material; but once a writer satisfies the requirements of dramatic presentation, the methods of playwriting or screenwriting are the same as story writing or novel writing. **All consist of a series of scenes which the writer imaginatively presents.**

4.
Historical Truth and Poetic Truth

It is not uncommon for a critic to tell a young writer that his story is improbable; in response, the young writer cries out, "*But it really happened!*" The fact that something *really happened* does not make the story credible, probable, or suitable for good fiction. Indeed, the opposite is almost always true: **incidents or stories from real life usually make the poorest sort of art**. The fact that a thing has really happened is almost proof positive that no writer should attempt to record it as fiction.

Anything is possible; accidents do happen; rich uncles do die and leave a million; lightning does strike villains meditating among the ruins of worthy artifacts. But as the Greek philosopher **Aristotle** affirms, *the business of the writer is not to record the possible but, rather, to record the probable.* Historic truth is one thing; poetic truth another. An author's famous example of killing off six people (one of them by lightning) in a final chapter so that the hero may live happily ever after is should not be emulated. It might have happened, but it probably would not.

Narrative having historical truth tells what actually did happen; narrative having poetic truth tells what would probably have happened under certain circumstances. It is the latter narrative that is the single concern of the fiction writer (unless he prefers to write historical fiction).

Fiction writing is like playing a game of cards. The writer decides if he is going to play bridge, poker, hearts, or anything else; he decides the

conditions of play. He is not compelled to play any one of the games instead of some other. But once he has decided on the conditions, he cannot change the rules in the middle of the game. In the middle of a bridge game he cannot suddenly decide that deuces outweigh aces, or that clubs are worth more than spades. He must play out the game according to the conditions of the game.

Likewise, if a fiction writer decides he wants to write a story about colonial America, he must not bring in a U.S. Apache helicopter with Sidewinder missiles to help his hero rescue the heroine from the villain. To do so would make the writer guilty of what **William Archer** calls "**improbability on the external plane**."

If the hero succeeds in rescuing the heroine by a more plausible device than a helicopter in colonial America, and if he is fleeing with her along a mountain trail, with the villain in close pursuit, **and if an avalanche suddenly descends and erases the villain**, the writer is guilty of creating an **improbable event**. It is not impossible that such a timely landslide would occur, but it is excessively improbable.

Finally, if the bloodthirsty villain should actually capture the hero and heroine, tie them to the stake for burning, and then suddenly decide to release them after all, and let them go free with gifts and blessings—the writer portraying such a happy event is guilty of **psychological improbability**. It is possible that the villain would change in such a manner, but it is not probable.

These three types of improbability are the ones the fiction writer must ever guard against.

5.
Improbability in Fiction

In spite of what we have just learned, improbability may, under certain circumstances, have a place in fiction.

It is an old saying that readers will "*strain at a gnat of improbability in the progress of a story, but swallow a camel at the very beginning.*"

In other words, the reader will go along with the writer, play almost any kind of game that the writer wishes under whatever rules or conditions the writer specifies; but once the game is started, the reader expects the writer to play according to the announced rules and conditions.

Thus, the reader might shy away at having a story end with a husband and wife unexpectedly inheriting a fortune; but he would readily accept a story that began with the couple just having inherited a fortune.

The reader might balk at a story that ended with an unannounced call from a radio station telling a woman she had just won an all-expenses-paid trip to Paris; but the reader would accept such a condition readily enough as the preliminary condition of a story.

Indeed, using an improbable situation at the beginning of a story renders one of the best starting points for a story.

—Improbability is acceptable in a story when the story is impossible. For example, fantasies such as Andersen's fairy tales, *Alice*

in Wonderland, the *Arabian Nights*, and so on, which are fundamentally impossible, may be improbable without shocking the reader. That is, miracles may happen in them, sudden rescues may come, animals may learn to speak, storm and lightning may destroy the old witch, or anything else not specifically bargained for at the beginning may occur.

—Improbability is acceptable when the main charm of the story lies in its improbabilities. Many comedies which one sees on stage or screen contain this type of improbability. There are impossible escapes, incredible encounters, sensational accidents, astonishing strokes of luck, and vast misunderstandings.

6.
Chance and Coincidence

Technically, we can define *chance* as "an unexpected and simultaneous happening of two related events"; and we can define *coincidence* in the same way except that three or more events are involved. Actually, the distinction is more of academic interest. It is true that *chance* and *coincidence* happen in real life. Many people say that chance and coincidence are justifiable in fiction. But fiction is not a picture of what could happen in life, but of what would probably happen under a given set of conditions. **Chance plays a part in all lives; but few people regulate their lives according to chance.** Most people make plans according to what will probably happen. Nevertheless, as with improbability (of which chance and coincidence are only one aspect), chance and coincidence may sometimes have a place in fiction.

— Long ago Aristotle mentioned as permitted in tragedy that kind of chance that seems to imply design. And he told the story of the murderer who, happening to lean against the statue of the man he had murdered, was himself killed by the statue unexpectedly tumbling down and crushing him. The accident seems to imply design; and Aristotle doubtless approved it because of the old Greek belief in destiny or fate existing superior to the gods themselves.

A similarly intense belief in destiny forms the basis of that neat, almost tricky, unity of **William Sydney Porter's** stories. The "Porter ending" is perfectly satisfying, not because it is a surprise, but because it is the only ending that could possibly have happened. His "*Double-Dyed Deceiver*" exacts the pattern of Aristotle's illustration mentioned above.

A young man kills another young man; the murderer becomes a refugee from justice; through one chance after another he finally becomes the foster son of the parents of the young man he had slain. Here is destiny working itself out. The ending is a surprise; but under the circumstances (if we only believe in the inevitable rightness of things) it is the one ending possible.

The same thing is true of another story of Porter's, "*Roads of Destiny.*" A weak young man leaving home comes to a branching of the road. He takes one branch, has certain adventures, and comes by his death in a certain way. Then the story is re-started: he takes the other branch, has certain other adventures, and comes by his death in the same way. And then the story is again re-started: he goes back home, has certain adventures, and comes by his death in the same way. The idea behind the story is that a man of a certain character will eventually come to an inevitable end, no matter what he does in the meantime that a man's destiny lies within himself. This is a progression over the old Greek idea of an external destiny, but the effect in fiction is the same.

— Destiny and chance are close kin. Perhaps they are the same thing. In any event, a story may justifiably use chance or coincidence when the author wishes to show that chance (or destiny) governs men's lives. Many of **Thomas Hardy's** novels have coincidence piled on coincidence because the author wishes to show that mankind is the plaything of the Immanent Will, and is not the master of his fate. In a similar way, **Joseph Conrad** writes an entire novel, *Chance*, to show that man's fate is determined by chance alone, not by anything sane or rational in the universe or in his own nature.

— Finally, chance is justifiable in fiction under certain technical circumstances. When chance complicates the difficulties of the author

and his characters instead of solving them, chance is forgivable in a story. If, for example, a character has carefully planned to escape from a prison-camp through a tunnel he has dug under the fence, and if a small dog chasing a rat uncovers the tunnel and reveals it to the guards, the reader will accept the chance; it makes matters more difficult for the author and for his character. But if, just as the prisoner is about to escape and a guard is coming to investigate a suspicious noise, the dog runs up and bites the guard's leg, and distracts his attention while the hero escapes, the reader will balk; the chance has made matters easier for the writer and for his character.

7.
Surprise

Despite popular opinion to the contrary, outright surprise in fiction is seldom used nowadays by great writers. A plot built up with any reasonable regard to probability, to natural law, to consistency of character, to philosophic necessity, to cause and effect, can usually surprise only in its externals, not in the plot itself. Real surprise is clear evidence of poor structure. Even worse (and dreadfully amateurish) is the story that leads the reader to believe through several pages that a certain thing is happening, and then brings the reader up abruptly at the end with the revelation that something altogether different has been happening. **It is deliberate deception, outright lying.** It can hardly be forgiven.

Any surprise in a story must be a surprise in method. "*Give the reader the ending he expects in a way that he doesn't expect.*" It is ancient

advice, but is good. Perhaps it would be better if it were written: "*Never give a reader an ending that he has had no reason to expect, but always bring about the ending in an original and unexpected way.*" Actually, the original and unexpected ending may sometimes border on chance or coincidence. But the chance or coincidence is not vital in the story itself; it involves only a method of ending, not the real ending.

For example, the ending of *Hamlet* is destined to be tragic from the beginning; it is impossible that the characters could have avoided tragedy. But the actual methods by which their deaths are brought about at the end involve accidentally exchanged swords and a poisoned cup (accidentally?) used by the Queen. Only the method here is original and unexpected. Tragedy would have arrived somehow, in any event. What would have been inexcusable would have been a happy ending to the play with all the villains deciding to reform, *Hamlet* forgiving everyone, *Ophelia* proved to have been not drowned after all, her and *Hamlet* marrying, and everybody living happily ever afterward. **Shakespeare** does have certain plays ending in such a way, it is true; but nobody thinks they are the greater for such endings. These particular plays are great in spite of their plots, not because of them.

Stevenson says that if a story is going to end tragically, it ought to begin ending tragically with its very first sentence. At any rate, **we do not want** characters to undergo sudden conversions; **we do not want** characters to act "out of character"; **we do not want** to prepare four-fifths of a story for one kind of ending, and then get the opposite kind; **we do not want** the laws of nature and of probability suspended. If our hero is to rescue the heroine, he must do it in an original and unexpected way; if our hero is to be elected to Congress, he must get himself elected in some original and unexpected way; if our hero is to

marry the heiress, he must win her hand in some original and unexpected way.

In conclusion, **two special don'ts**:

1) Don't have a character escape from his difficulties by waking up and finding that he has had a dream.

2) Don't kill off a character at the end just because you have to finish the story somehow. Whenever you feel inclined to kill off a character, be suspicious of yourself. Don't kill him unless you have excellent reasons for doing so, besides the necessity of bringing the story to an end.

The End