

“MY NOVEL” WRITING COURSE

MODULE ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

PART A: Finding an Idea for a Plot

PART B: Character Development

PART C: The Opening Paragraph

By the end of this module, you will have a range of techniques for ‘inspiring the muse’ and will know how to construct a first paragraph with hooks to grab the reader.



Introduction

Thank you for your interest in the "My Novel" Writing Course. This first module (and associated assignment) is your free trial. The module makes a genuine start on the course; it is not just a ‘teaser’. You will start planning the novel that you want to write using the course and my mentoring help. I want to stress that there is no obligation to continue buying the modules (which are purchased individually for \$24.70, as you want them). If you decide not to continue with the course, you will not be cajoled, pestered or drowned in junk mail.

Welcome to the course. My name is Jim Parsons. It will be my voice you hear throughout this writing course, and I will be drawing on my personal writing background and extensive face-to-face adult education teaching experience for instruction material and examples. I will also be the assessor of your assignments, so you and I will get to know one another well. It is an individualised course and my style is very informal; I am always delighted to answer questions or just engage in friendly email chats. In fact, many students have become personal friends over my years of conducting the course.

The material I present throughout the 20 modules will give you an excellent grounding in the major aspects of novel construction and allow you to acquire a wide range of essential writing skills. In the assignments, you will be given exercises that target specific skills, and most of these writing exercises will become scenes and chapters in the novel you are developing along the way. Thus, they are not disjointed exercises: the course revolves around a novel-writing project. By the end of the course, you should have a novel close to completion ... certainly a novel that you are capable of completing and one that has not stalled for want of ideas.

Course structure

Obviously, as you will be working on a real novel in your assignments as we progress, you

need the entire range of writing skills right at the outset—but, sadly, it isn't feasible to teach every skill on Day One. I had to make decisions about the order of skills to teach.

I have structured the course with a 'first things first' process that I hope will assist you in the steady development of your manuscript. The first three modules mainly address the planning and plotting of your novel. Thereafter, lots more actual writing is involved, including entire key chapters which you will present for my critiquing and mentoring.

Again, welcome! Let's commence the course.

Part A: Finding an Idea for a Plot

PURPOSE:

Our first *joint* task in this instructional/mentoring session is to ensure that you have some useful ideas as the foundation for a novel.

You may have chosen this mentoring course for the very reason that you have already have a plot idea that compels you to write. That's great! Let's use that.

If, on the other hand, you are just keen to try novel-writing and don't know where to start, the writing prompts in this assignment might inspire some ideas.

Nothing is fixed in concrete: in the short turn-around period while I assess your assignment, your subconscious mind, your Muse, may have been very busy and led you to change direction. That isn't a problem: you simply revise and spell out the basic concepts you have decided on before attempting Assignment 2.

What is Creativity?

Creativity is that wonderful ability to pull ideas seemingly from nowhere, to dream up something no one else has ever thought of, and, when it comes to writing, to find a new, fresh and lively variation on existing plots, character types and writing styles. You can build a new house with old timber, but unless you are infused with some spark of genius, passers-by will only ever see a strange-looking contraption made from second-hand junk. It is claimed there is no such thing as a new plot: writers rely on creativity to fashion something readers will consider new and fresh.

Finding Creativity

I can teach you the mechanics and tricks of writing a novel but I can't teach you creativity. You have to find creativity – or *it* has to find you! I believe that our heads are frequently so busy trying to force out a story like toothpaste from a tube or to puzzle out a plot that we don't leave room for creativity to creep in. Certain mindless, relaxing activities seem to help. Walking is often effective, especially taking a slow ramble through natural surroundings. Hand over the task to your muse, your subconscious.

It is remarkable how often this mental conditioning works. I would be strolling along a rural lane, chatting to the dogs, when suddenly an idea would pop in my consciousness like a bubble in a thermal mud pool. Being prone to talking to myself, I would growl: "Of course that's what happens! Why didn't I think of that myself?" Such Eureka moments come, like the original, while soaking in a bathtub. They can come when you pack that busy conscious mind away for a few hours' sleep each night. Keep a pen and notepad handy by the bed!

Writing Prompts

The old Supremes song says: "You can't hurry love." Well, you can't hurry creativity, either. The harder you *try* to think of an answer, the more you block the creative process, and the longer it will take. Nevertheless, many people find writing prompts useful when they're trying to come up with a new story or somewhere to start the plot.

A writing prompt gives the conscious mind a puzzle. We take something at random or lump several disparate things together, and demand of ourselves: "Here, make something out of this!" It could be three photos clipped from three different types of magazine. It could be a conversation overheard on a bus. Whatever it is, we must not dodge the task. We must produce *something*, anything. The results are usually interesting ... and sometimes awful. The stories created from some writing prompt exercises would be weird indeed.

But let's not mistake the true purpose of a writing prompt. Nothing you write can be wrong or stupid. There would be few great stories generated straight onto the page from a writing prompt. You might arrive at a plausible concept, but the method is still an activity of your conscious mind – a piece of deliberate decision-making and planning.

The real work is happening elsewhere. You have merely kept your conscious mind occupied on one task, teased your subconscious unmercifully, and opened the window to creativity. The subconscious mind, I can almost guarantee, is happily working on something else. The story lines you develop from the writing prompts may well be fizzers, but make sure you come back to the results later. Leave it be for a day or two. Re-visit the writing prompt material you wrote so painfully, extracted like an abscessed tooth from that silly exercise. Suddenly, the *real* creative ideas will emerge, strolling out from behind the words you thought were so pitiful and useless.

Or maybe, the piece you wrote won't figure in your burst of creativity at all. The morning *after* you've written that terrible exercise, lo and behold, you wake up with a brand new idea for a story – and it's totally unrelated to the story prompt. It may happen the next day, four days later, ten days later, a month later ... it could well happen as you are reading the comments I have written on your returned assignment. It works because engaging your conscious mind with the writing prompt allowed your subconscious mind the freedom to work on the important problems.

For that matter, this entire course is one long writing prompt. You will very likely find that, after completing a few modules, your creativity will be singing; ideas for plots, characters, and scenes will pop unbidden into your head. You will find yourself desperate to just scratch at whatever literary bug is biting you and to start writing a book that day. When you give your creativity some room to play, it won't let you down.

PART B: Character Development

Everything hinges on character... the best plot is a rather empty series of events if the reader doesn't care a damn about the main character who is the centre of all the excitement. Even if you are itching to create an entire fantasy or futuristic world, don't neglect character. The plot should not be a vehicle that simply transports your characters from A to B; it is your characters who should drive and steer the plot.

Crucial to plot and to character delineation is the need for the main character to have a burning goal. Unless the character has a strong goal or quest, there is no good reason for the reader to follow him or her. Once that character has a goal, it is then your task as author to throw as many setbacks, difficulties and disasters in the way of that goal as possible. Essentially, that is what a plot is. It is not merely a sequence of events; it is a series of setbacks that frustrate your MC's – right until the very end.

As well, your MC will need a Dominant Strength and a corresponding Dominant Flaw. You will, of course, develop well-rounded characters who will undoubtedly have many positive characteristics and a few weaknesses, flaws or oddities to make them human. However, your Main Character requires one *special strength* or character trait that he or she will call on at the last minute – at 'The Darkest Moment' – when all seems lost. This is referred to as the *Dominant Strength* – the most significant characteristic of your MC (Main Character)

It is that special characteristic that will mould the climax of the story and save the day. In many stories, that special characteristic is not initially apparent in the character... he or she may not know that, deep down, there is this reservoir of courage, love, strength, wisdom, determination or whatever it is you assign. It may have to be discovered or developed ... and that becomes part of the story – the psychological development of that character.

This concept is writ large in *The Wizard of Oz* where it becomes a parable or analogy. The Cowardly Lion doesn't know he really already has courage; the Scarecrow without a brain is a lot smarter than he thinks, and the Tin Man is loved by all ... a sure sign that he has a heart himself. Each is tested and the discovery of the missing strength is made.

In this first assignment, you will be asked to assign a strength (either present or to be developed or discovered) that will be at the core of your main character (MC) and is a key plot element. You will also be asked to nominate a Dominant Flaw

Main characters without a flaw or weakness are very one-dimensional, unbelievable ... and often downright irritating. It makes good sense if the character's Dominant Flaw is an extension of, or corollary to, his or her Dominant Strength. It makes it all the more believable.

For example:

If the character's strength is courage, the corresponding flaw could be foolhardiness. If the dominant strength is cautious and thorough planning, the flaw might be procrastination.

A character may have a flaw or failing that is unrelated to his or her Dominant Strength, but you must be certain that it does not contradict it. For example, a character who is always noble and brave can't suddenly, in one important scene, get jittery and run away. The cautious, distrustful hard-nosed detective can't suddenly blow the case because he falls for a good story. He COULD, however, hinder his own progress by being distrustful and failing to believe the truth when it is told to him.

Which brings me to the whole point of having a Dominant Flaw for your MC. One of the many obstacles or setbacks your MC will strike when trying to reach his or her goal, will be a self-inflicted one. The most common positioning for this self-inflicted setback is the 'first complication' at the start of ACT 2, if the book is considered as a 3 Act drama. (If this is confusing, don't worry – it gets covered in a later module ... I'm talking ahead of the material here!)

The character's Dominant Flaw contributes to the tension in the plot and becomes central to a plot point. With a vague plot concept, a main character, a goal for that character, plus a dominant strength and a dominant flaw, you have a good solid basis to start planning your novel.

PART C: The Opening Paragraph

PURPOSE:

I want to offer you some writing to do along with your planning: I'm sure that a keen writer won't feel very satisfied with a course that is purely mechanical. As well, this will give me an opportunity to assess your present level of writing skills, to give some sound advice (my favourite part of the course!) and help you with any basic errors I discover. I may even offer (optional) worksheets and exercises for you in certain areas such as use of commas and semicolons or in punctuating dialogue.

To get you writing, in this section I'm going to discuss one of the most important crafting techniques to guarantee a first chapter that will make publishers sit up and take notice. To be precise we're going to concentrate on the very first paragraph and, in your first assignment, I will want you to apply the principles I teach you to the writing exercise.

I'll start this discussion in a roundabout way:

The Book-Buying Process

If you hope to be a published author, you no doubt also hope that browsing readers will take one look at your novel on the bookstore shelf and snap it up. That's the plan, right?

What is the process that gets the prospective buyer to choose *your* book instead of the latest big-name blockbuster, the new offering by an author they have come to love, or the myriad other new books just waiting to be read?

This is how it happens. First, the cover must grab their attention; next, the title must make them curious. Ah, here's a book browser now, staring at *your* book. She's picking it up! She turns it over to read the blurb on the back. It's looking good! Now she opens the

book. *What is that browser most likely to read to make an instant evaluation of your work?* That's right, the very first page, to see if it grabs her. Chapter One, page 1.

This is your only chance to turn that browser into a buyer. There's a job interview slogan that I feel applies superbly to novel-writing:

You only get one chance to make a good first impression!

And remember, your very first browser – the most important one of all to impress – is the agent or publisher you hope will buy your manuscript.

Why would anyone waste precious book-buying dollars on a book that has absolutely no appeal from Page 1? You won't get the chance to look over her shoulder and say: "It gets better. You should see what happens on page 50... and ... and ... and the ending is terrific."

Show the Reader How Good You Are

There is a way, actually, that you can say all those things. If Page 1 is intriguing, exciting, and engrossing, that reader will automatically *presume* that page 50 is going to be a knock-out, *and* that the ending alone will be worth buying the book to read. You need to strut your stuff in Chapter One and especially in that all-important first paragraph.

If you're a millionaire best-selling author with a huge reputation and following, perhaps your faithful readers will hang about for a page or two while you describe the ants crawling up the wall and the moss on the headstones, because they *do* know from experience that it gets a whole lot better on page 50. You, as a first-time author, do not have that luxury. Don't take any chances. Don't waste your first paragraph 'setting the scene', or filling in back story about how the Lionarians first came to the planet Zeta 750,000 years ago.

The Writing Hook or Literary Hook

You must use that first paragraph to hook your reader. And to hook your reader, you need ... a nice sharp shiny hook. To extend the fishing analogy, ganged hooks are best. Ganged hooks? In fishing, that term means several hooks in a row, each threaded through the eye of the one above.

It's quite possible for you to build your opening paragraph so deviously that it bristles with hooks. If one misses the mark, another is sure to make the catch. (And you thought authors were a noble and principled lot, didn't you?)

Types of Reader Hooks

Many things qualify as a hook, sometimes even the quality of the prose. For kids, the very word 'wizard' or 'horse' might be sufficient. Adult readers are usually a little more demanding. They need to feel an instant interest in the main character, or be intrigued by a situation being played out in front of their eyes. They might also be drawn to read on, if there is an obvious promise of something looming. Of the many types of hooks, we will concentrate on just a few key ones. We will avoid the outrageous, the shocking, the totally unexpected, and also evocative settings. These have their place, but need to be handled with care, preferably by an experienced writer.

Let's concentrate on these few hooks – the sharpest in your writing tackle box:

- *Introduce a unique character or unique voice*
- *Start with a journey*
- *Use foreshadowing*
- *Use compelling dialogue*
- *Introduce danger*
- *Promise the reader a change from his/her ordinary everyday life*
- *Get inside the main character's head and show his/her feelings*

The Two All-important Hooks

You dangle in front of the prospective reader the *two things they most want*: action and suspense. These are the two chief reasons that people read fiction. But let me clarify the terms. You probably know Action and suspense by their Hollywood connotations. You now need to understand their literary use.

Action: In this context, action doesn't mean that bullets must be sprayed, punches thrown or cars rolled over cliffs. It simply means some forward movement in the story line – *story-telling* rather than static display. If you start with a prolonged description of the garden or the weather or by telling the history of the village where the action will take place, or by philosophizing about the nature of greed, that's static display. Conversely, if you start with two people sitting across a table from one another, deep in discussion (preferably conflict), then that quiet moment is actually action, because the plot is underway.

Suspense: By suspense I don't mean the proverbial Hollywood 'cliff-hanger' or the race to the hospital to save the victim's life. No, this time the suspense is *any form of not knowing*. When readers have their curiosity piqued, they want answers and they can't have those answers until they turn the page. *That's* suspense. Knowledge is suspended... indeed, dangled like a carrot to move the reader forward through the book. Just remember this: suspense doesn't have to be sensational; it only needs to be effective. Thus, if there is a glancing reference on Page One to indicate that the Main Character hates men, and the reader is curious to find out why – curious enough to turn the page – that is suspense.

The two most significant reader-grabbing techniques you can employ in your opening paragraph are these:

- **Drop your reader into the middle of the action, have it swirling around them, and let them feel the story in motion. Once on the move, they won't want to stop the ride. [Action]**
- **Make your reader damned curious. Make the entire paragraph a 'what will happen next' question and preferably have them asking themselves a few other minor questions along the way. Curiosity works! It will bug readers until they find out the answer to the question they have been asking themselves; it may bug them sufficiently to buy the book. [Suspense]**

First paragraph example - UN inspiring

Let's start with an opening paragraph as an example of how NOT to do it. It is by no means an awful paragraph, but it doesn't contain much to hook the reader. (I've constructed it, by the way – my examples are not borrowed from books or students' work).

When Bill went to get the paper, the main street was even quieter than usual. He said hello to Freda Gore, the fruiterer, who was carrying cases of apples out to display them in the doorway. It was an old family business. Bill remembered Freda's grandfather doing much the same thing back in 1950. As a kid, he had liked the old man who occasionally handed him an apple off the stand. The grandfather - he couldn't remember his name - died in 1961. It was a big funeral, he recalled. Then it was Mr Gore Jnr who took over. His name was Bob. The shop remained much the same, maybe in deference to the old man who had started the business. It was only when Freda took over in 1990 that things started to happen. Freda had a few good business ideas. He'd become one of her best customers. Bill rested on his Zimmer frame for a while and exchanged pleasantries, then he shuffled off for his treat of the morning - the Clamville Clucker, the weekly free rag that contained all the town gossip.

Evaluate this by the two 'baits' above.

- Is the reader dropped into the action and carried along by it? Well, yes, at the pace of Bill's Zimmer frame shuffle down Main Street. In effect, nothing is happening. The story starts with a static description of the street and some back story about the family who owns the shop.
- Is the reader curious about outcomes? Is the reader asking questions? Possibly they are asking: "Where is this going? What the heck is this book about?" That's not the sort of question readers should be asking. Neither Bill nor Freda Gore is introduced in a way that makes them unique, interesting or pursuable. There is no clear direction to the story.

First Paragraph Example re-write - with stronger reader hooks

Here is a re-write of the same scene. It contains information that the original writer probably intended to introduce in chapter 2 or 3, once the scene had been set, back story dealt with, and characters delineated. It was implicit in the original version but the writer didn't feel the need to let the reader know.

Bill clattered down Main at a blistering pace, the rapid tap-tap of his Zimmer frame echoing in the empty street, tiger-striped by the early morning sun. It was just eight, but Freda would be open, bless her. There she was, setting up the fruit display outside the shop door. He saw her turn to watch his progress, a box of apples clamped to her overflowing bosom. As he crossed the road, she dumped the box, put her hands on her broad hips, and laughed at him

"What?" he said. "What's so funny?"

"Well, we know what you're after, don't we?" Her face creased into an amused leer.

"Is it in, then?" You said it would take about a week." He'd picked the title straight from Freda's wholesale video catalogue. Her little side-line might have saved the family business

from going under, but her Methodist grandfather would be spinning in his grave.

Freda nodded. "It's out the back."

He felt a frisson of pleasure. It was always a special moment to step into that curtained-off area at the back, behind the mountain of cabbages, and see the array of juicy x-rated video covers. He swung into the doorway.

"Hold on a minute," Freda said. "There's something I think you should see." She took a copy of the free local news sheet from the stand at the door. Bill had always enjoyed the Clamville Clucker - it was full of salacious town gossip. Freda pushed the paper at him. "Page three."

He opened the paper and stared. His hands started to shake. "This isn't funny, Freda. It's cruel and malicious. Someone's going to pay dear for this! I'll get 'em; you see if I don't."

First Paragraph Analysis - Hooks and all

Perhaps this no longer qualifies as one paragraph, although the inclusion of dialogue and white space does make it appear longer than it is. Nevertheless, it simply expands the material offered in the original example. Let's see how the re-write differs from the original.

First, look at how it stacks up against the two 'baits' - action and suspense.

- *ACTION: The reader is dropped into the action at a key point - in this case, that critical event which jump-starts the drama and ensures that the characters' lives will never be the same again. We have a sense that something has to happen - the story is on the move. As well, the wacky characters and silly name for the local free paper suggest this can only be a light-hearted tale. So, we have given the reader the tone of the book.*
- *SUSPENSE: Some minor questions act as hooks along the way. Even when they are answered quickly, they keep the reader engaged. The reader wonders why Bill is in such a hurry at that hour. For a moment, we wonder what it is he could want at a fruit shop that warrants a sly leer. We wonder what it is that Freda considers so important he should see it immediately. Then, of course, the big hook, the huge unanswered question: "What is in that paper so terrible that Bill swears vengeance on the writer?" Does it concern his movie viewing choices; does it refer to an associated area of his character; how does a man in a Zimmer frame exact revenge?*

Now let's look to see if there are other hooks we can tick off the list. There are.

- *Introduce a Unique Character: Whether Bill amuses or disgusts you, the small town porn-junkie on the Zimmer frame captures the imagination.*
- *Use of foreshadowing: The reader knows Bill plans to do something to the perpetrator.*
- *Use of compelling dialogue: Not exactly compelling, but the dialogue does introduce intrigue.*

Do you see how it is possible to use this list of criteria to evaluate an opening paragraph? It follows that you can also select items from that list to design a paragraph that works in several ways to hook the reader. That will be one of your assessment tasks.

Remember that, as a novice author, with no established readership, you can't afford to glide slowly into a story. You must take every opportunity to enmesh your new reader in your story, and the best possible time to do that is in the opening paragraph.

Other Tasks the Opening Paragraph should Perform

The opening paragraph is expected to work hard: not only does it hook the reader, but it also allows the reader to settle in to the tense used and to accept either first or third person narration. The opening paragraph will also usually establish the 'voice' of the narrator and the tone the reader should expect for the remainder of the novel. This task may extend to the entire chapter, but there are usually a few clues for the reader even in the first paragraph.

Voice: a definite voice speaks in the narration. This is especially true in a first person narration, where a character is given the role of telling the story; however, the 'hidden' narrator, who should always try to employ a neutral, unobtrusive tone, will usually be revealed even in the choice of vocabulary and sentence structure... perhaps a sense of warmth for, or distancing from, the characters. When the narrator is a character in the story, very often the distinctive 'voice' is part of the charm of the novel.

Tone: Think tone of voice and you are pretty close to the literary meaning of tone. The tone of the narration can be stuffy and intellectual, ponderous, giddy, or sinister. It can be breezy, tongue-in-cheek, witty or satirical – downright funny – or it could be solemn, weighty and serious, or even gothic-dark and mysterious. Thus, a funeral scene could make the reader shiver, weep or laugh, depending on the tone that is set.

These aspects will be examined again in a later chapter but, for the moment, just be aware that the decision you make about who tells your story and the tone of the voice you choose to greet the reader can have as great an impact on the novel overall as the plot does.

I look forward to seeing what you write.

Best wishes for the assignment.

Jim Parsons

END OF MODULE ONE

Please move on to Assignment 1.

Open the Assignment1.doc file which was sent separately.