



The Secret to Great Writing

At our Virtual Jamboree in November, four key All About Writing trainers each proposed a secret to great writing. Here are their presentations, in alphabetical order.

ARCHITECTURE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Fred de Vries

I want to talk about two important aspects of writing that are often overlooked. And they are equally important as, if not more important than things like description, detail, sub-text, characters, voice, whatever. Let's call it the architecture and the infrastructure of the story. Both have to do with the way a story looks and reads. And those are things that writers, both fiction and non-fiction, often completely overlook or ignore. A story may be very exciting, totally gripping, feature unbelievably fascinating characters, but if the architecture and infrastructure don't work, it will fall completely flat.

So let me tell you why I chose these aspects.

Firstly, I've been reading a book by Dutch writer Martin Brill, who was 'the master of the column'. Throughout the years he developed an increasingly unique style. One of the main characteristics was the one-word paragraph, often not even a word but an expression, things like 'exactly' or 'tja', which is untranslatable; perhaps 'oh well' would come close.

He said the reason for these ultra-short, high impact paragraphs was that he wanted to indicate a kind of 'and now for something completely different'. A way to change the subject. But, he added, he also isolated words as a way to draw extra attention to something. You can imagine what his columns looked like, how the one-word paragraphs stood out, made you want to read what came before, and what will come after. This is part of what I'll refer to as the architecture of the story, the way it appears, the lay of the text. The ultimate example of shape matching content was American 'The Bomb', a poem by Gregory Corso, written in 1958 about the nuclear bomb. The piece was shaped like a mushroom cloud.

The second reason for choosing architecture and infrastructure was an interview with British writer Martin Amis, who, among other things, talked about the problem of repetition. Like if you have used a word before and you don't want to use it again, what do you do? Amis opens the Thesaurus. There he finds several possible replacements. He checks the dictionary, just to be sure that the meaning is exactly what he wants. Then he places his substitute word in the sentence, and reads it out loud, to see if it works in terms of sound and rhythm. This is part of the interior, the infrastructure. It deals with

questions such as: when do repetitions work? Does alliteration add anything, or is it corny? And if I have a sentence with two nouns, and one gets an adjective, should the other one also get one, for the sake of the rhythm?

The third reason is that, for the past few months, I have been translating my book, *Blues for the White Man*, into English. It will be published by Penguin Random House early next year.

The job made me think a lot about the architecture of the pages, the way they look. Does it look appealing? Does it look interesting? It also posed other questions. Does every piece of dialogue get a separate paragraph? When do I start a new paragraph? What do I want to achieve by starting a new paragraph? And what do I use to mark a new paragraph? Three times the space bar? Five times? The Tab bar? A blank line?

Paragraphs are tricky. The newsy way of using them, where almost every sentence gets a separate one, doesn't work in a piece of fiction or non-fiction. But huge blocks of text can be equally off-putting. Unless, of course, you do it on purpose, and want to prove or show something by having this wall of words.

Translating my own work also confronted me with the infrastructure of the writing, rhythm and flow. How do I avoid the sentences sounding too similar? Can I start two subsequent sentences with the word 'I'? What about length? Is there enough variety in the pacing? Have I avoided too many subordinate clauses? Does a full stop suffice, or do we need a comma or a semi-colon? How will I code dialogue? With single quotation marks? Double ones? A dash? None at all? And when do I use an exclamation mark?

You have many means at your disposal. You can use different fonts, things like italics. You can mark a new sub-chapter by using a star, three stars, a number, a blank line.

So the use of space, codes, and lay-out is of incredible importance for how we want to bring something across. It's part of our voice. It can whisper, it can scream; it can make you ignore; it can put you on the wrong track; it can seduce, it can repulse; it can invite, it can exclude; it can make you sing, it can put you to sleep.

And even here, when I'm writing these last sentences, I wonder, shall I separate by using a comma, a full stop, or a semi-colon?

ATTITUDE: THE WRITER'S VOICE

Michele Rowe

Structure you can learn, grammar you can learn, you can also learn to craft sub-text, (if you are patient and discerning enough to recognize it when you see it) all of these things can be learnt from reading widely, regularly, and closely, or by studying for a creative writing MA, or better still, by participating in any one of our brilliant courses.

But arguably, and as this is a debate, it *is* arguable, what you can't learn is what I call Attitude. What do I mean by attitude? I mean having something to say, that has worth and weight. A distinctive view of the world that is important enough for you to want to spend hours laboring over an essay, book or screenplay. This author's voice, uniquely yours, comes not from your attitude to writing, but from your attitude to life.

I suppose you could also call it the writer's temperament, a good old-fashioned word. But I think it's something more. It's the writer's eye and ear, her perception and imagination, her outlook on life, a strong sense of having a stance on life that is different to anyone else's.

We have all read those more than serviceable books, thousands of which get published every year. We enjoy them, even admire how well they are put together. They may even have literary merit, we may even learn something from them. But the truly unforgettable voices in literature, like Toni Morrison, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, James Baldwin, George Eliot, Jane Austen—all took positions on the page. They had points of view, strong opinions, in fact, if I dare use another old-fashioned word, principles.

Iris Murdoch said the following when asked about this subject, 'A novelist is bound to express values, and I think he should be conscious of the fact that he is, in a sense, a compulsory moralist. Novelists differ, of course, in the extent to which they set out to reflect on morals and to put that reflection into their work. I certainly do reflect and put this reflection into my works, whether or not with success. The question is how to do it. If you can't do it well, you had better not do it at all. If you have strong moral feelings, you may be in difficulties with your characters because you may want them to be less emphatic than you are yourself. In answer to your question, I think a novelist should be wary of being a teacher in a didactic sense, but should be conscious of himself as a moralist.'

Now you don't want to be a boring proselytizer, obviously, but without a strong sense of purpose, of wanting to persuade, and an unshakeable sense of the singularity of your own perception, and unless you cleave to that part of yourself as closely as you possibly can, you won't produce great writing.

Attitude puts a stamp on the authorial voice, and is the fundamental bedrock of writing. It is the voice of moral outrage, or cynicism, or humiliation. It determines whether you see the world as dangerous, or hilarious, or even pointless (look at Sartre). It also determines your style and tone—a cynic will go for a satirical tone — a hopeless romantic will be lyrical, the optimist may have a light touch and write witty repartee. A brooding melancholic on the other hand, an introvert who is tender and inward and aesthetic, might become a Virginia Woolf. You can see how attitude is the key to the writer's voice, which in turn is attracted to a certain type of story, tone, and rhythm.

When it comes to writing a character, the writer needs to know everything about them—even if none of those details ends up in the book. But besides knowing their creation's full biography, the author must also reflect upon their character's values so they can present them with moral dilemmas. You can't write a novel or film without implying values. You can't write even a commercial, popular contemporary novel or movie without giving your characters moral problems and judgments. And that is all found in the attitude of the writer.

The Nigerian American writer, Teju Cole, says that the writer has to take us into her confidence, without appearing to do so. This invitation into the writer's thoughts is always in work that gets under the reader's skin. It is there regardless of whether it is a writer we identify with or not; it doesn't matter whether the writer is female or male, old or young, whether the story we are reading is written in the first person or in the third. It is the conviction with which they convey their attitude to the world that draws us in.

In great writing, the writer takes the gamble of letting their own unique viewpoint—and I'm not talking here about lyrical descriptions or even well rounded characters, I'm talking about a voice that captures and earns the serious loyalty of the reader. Of course the risk of the fiercely individual voice divides the public like no other. If there's any book you feel has entered your head, you can be sure that there will be other readers who say, "I found it boring" or "I really couldn't stand that book".

When writing a novel you are in a state of unlimited freedom which is, frankly, very alarming. Every choice you make will exclude another choice, so it's important to make sure that you write about what you think matters. What has moral force in the world—how you can change reader's minds, how you can make them see the world, for even a few hours, through your eyes. It's only attitude that will give you a 'voice' that will keep you writing for months, sometimes years. It is the very bedrock of your creativity and the secret, in my opinion, to great writing.

DETAILS

Jo-Anne Richards

There are any number of stories in the world that tell of love won, love lost, innocence lost, experience gained, peace of mind won or lost.

What makes the difference between Jane Austen and Mills & Boon? I would argue it's in the power of detail.

Used well, it provides a magic carpet into a time and place. Give us the right specifics, they'll transport us into a character, a world and a moment in time.

If you provide no more than generalities, or rely too heavily on generic descriptors, we'll be distanced from its people and places. A "messy room" could mean anything. Our ability to conjure becomes confused.

But the right specifics and images can instantly bring a character into focus:

Mrs Micawber was trailed by children and never without a twin attached to a breast. She lived by the maxim, "I will never desert Mr. Micawber!"

Or take this young drug dealer:

...his 22-year-old, going on 50 face, his short hair and his pink skin and his beady black eyes. He was like a lab rat going through experiments to see exactly when he'd have a mental breakdown.

Details are infinitely malleable and layered. The right details of a room or a house will allow us to visualise it. Selected well, the specifics will also bring into focus the people who live there.

...the only light came from a lamp which threw a sharp white circle on melted candles, computer cables, empty beer bottles and butane cans, oil pastels boxed and loose, many catalogues raisonnées, books in German and English including Nabokov's *Despair* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, with the cover torn off, sketch books, art books, ashtrays and burnt tinfoil, and a grubby looking pillow where drowsed a gray tabby cat.

The details you select about a place could tell us more about:

- The relationship between the people who live there
- Their aesthetic sensibilities, shared or in conflict
- Their current preoccupations
- Their intellectual lives
- Their history
- Their ambitions
- And their emotional attachments

Details of a narrator's physiological reactions: heat, prickling at the brow, an itch ... can show us more about their emotional state, without your having to explain it.

Gestures, expressions and body language of other characters can show us personalities, relationships, emotions, likes, loves and dislikes.

But most magical of all, detail has another whole layer, because no detail is neutral. What a person observes shows us not only what they're observing, but more about themselves:

This lot come from London, where the dad works as a banker, and have four children. A shocking, unjust number, really, when you think about it. The mother just seems to pop them out, one after another, her stomach permanently inflated, her breasts constantly being heaved out of her garments in the back garden for some infant or other to nourish itself.

Through our observations we signal our age, innocence or lack thereof, our status in life, our interests and world view:

A pigeon was looking for his chop. He walked right in the blood. He was even sad as well, you could tell where his eyes were all pink and dead.

The flowers were already bent. There were pictures of the dead boy wearing his school uniform. His jumper was green.

My jumper's blue. My uniform's better. The only bad thing about it is the tie, it's too scratchy. I hate it when they're scratchy like that.

We can also signal a change – of mood or state of being – through what we notice and how:

At some point from yesterday to today, the air had gone from soggy to brittle. The Virginia creeper on the cabin had begun to turn overnight. This morning she had noticed a few red leaves, just enough to make her pause and take note of history.

A love story becomes more than boy meets girl or girl meets girl. It grows in strength and power and dimension, with every showing detail you use, until it allows us to understand more about a society, its dating habits, customs and beliefs, as well humanity in general.

THE SECRETS BENEATH THE WORDS

Richard Beynon

“Meaning” is the thing that lies behind, or beneath, or beyond. The sighs of a lover are what we note. But the meaning of those sighs is what we interpret. The speed of our hero’s response to attack – I’m thinking of Jason Bourne during one of many such encounters – tells us about his qualifications *as* hero. But the meaning of his skills lies in his murky past.

Meaning is always hidden. To disinter it, always requires acts of interpretation, speculation or investigation.

In life, the search for meaning might well be called humanity’s singular journey.

In creative writing of all kinds, meaning is what we *don’t* reveal, not directly. It is what’s hidden beneath the details, behind the events, beyond the incidents that we *do* reveal. And it bears the same relationship to what’s visible, that the subaquatic bulk of an iceberg does to what we can see above the surface.

Asking your reader to dig out the meaning of your story, entails asking her to become an active participant in the curious dance that takes place between the storyteller and his readers. The storyteller asks his reader to take note of what he writes, and to speculate and hypothecate about what the character really means, really wants, really intends. We do this in life every day, as we seek to discern the meaning of events, the agendas of people around us, and the possible futures before us.

Active, curious readers, remember, are more engaged with our stories. Active readers is what we all want.

Of course what I’m talking about is subtext – which in my view is the answer to the question we’re debating today: what is the secret to great writing?

Subtext points the way to the true meaning of a character’s motivations, goals and vulnerabilities, that hidden dimension that lies between the lines of his dialogue. Meaning that can only be construed from what we, as writers, carefully calculate and insert into our text.

Language is what we say with our words, but subtext is what we *really* say, with our bodies with the tone of our voice, with our eyes and our expression. Subtext expresses our real feelings – for instance, feelings of impatience or distaste which may lurk beneath small talk and compulsory politeness. Subtext is the emotional history, intention and metaphor that drives to the heart of your story.

You can imagine a novel without dialogue. You can imagine a novel without elaborate description. You can even imagine (if you're a postmodernist) a novel without characters or plot.

But can you imagine a novel without subtext, or meaning?

Always, with subtext, we know something *more* is going on. Something that's unspoken, something that might be alluded to, but should never be spelled out. In fact, every drama, whether for the page or the screen, is built on layers of subtext.

It's the indispensable ingredient of all engaging stories. It is, without question, the secret to great writing.