

50 Sure-Fire Storytelling Tricks

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Over the last twenty-five years, I've written thousands of articles on story structure and storytelling. Here, I've gathered together a few of the best on the topic of storytelling. I hope you find them illuminating in concept and practical in application.

Trick 1

Building Size (Changing Scope)

This first technique holds audience interest by revealing the true size of something over the course of the story until it can be seen to be either larger or smaller than it originally appeared. This makes things appear to grow or diminish as the story unfolds.

Conspiracy stories are usually good examples of increasing scope, as only the tip of the iceberg first comes to light and the full extent is ultimately much bigger. The motion picture All The President's Men illustrates this nicely. Stories about things being less extensive than they originally appear are not unlike The Wizard Of Oz in which a seemingly huge network of power turns out to be just one man behind a curtain.

Trick 2

Red Herrings (Changing Importance)

Red herrings are designed to make something appear more or less important than it really is. Several good examples of this technique can be found in the motion picture The Fugitive. In one scene a police car flashes its lights and siren at Dr. Kimble, but only to tell him to move along. In another scene, Kimble is in his apartment when an entire battalion of police show up with sirens blazing and guns drawn. It turns out they were really after the son of his landlord and had no interest in him at all. Red herrings can inject storytelling tension where more structurally related weaving may be lethargic.

Trick 3

Meaning Reversals (Shifting Context to Change Meaning)

Reversals change context. In other words, part of the meaning of anything we consider is due to its environment. The phrase, *guilt by association*, expresses this notion. In storytelling, we can play upon audience empathy and sympathy by making it like or dislike something, only to have it find out it was mistaken.

There is an old Mickey Mouse cartoon called Mickey's Trailer which exemplifies this nicely. The story opens with Mickey stepping from his house in the country with blue skies and white clouds. He yawns, stretches, then pushes a button on the house. All at once, the lawn roll up, the fence folds in and the house becomes a trailer. Then, the sky and clouds fold up revealing the trailer is actually parked in a junkyard. Certainly a reversal from our original understanding.

Trick 4

Message Reversals (Shifting Context to Change Message)

When we shift context to create a different message, the structure remains the same, but our appreciation of it changes. This can be seen very clearly in a Twilight Zone episode entitled, Invaders, in which Agnes Moorhead plays a lady alone on a farm besieged by aliens from another world. The aliens in question are only six inches tall, wear odd space suits and attack the simple country woman with space age weapons. Nearly defeated, she finally musters the strength to overcome the little demons, and smashes their miniature flying saucer. On its side we see the American Flag, the letters U.S.A. and hear the last broadcast of the landing team saying they have been slaughtered by a giant. Now, the structure didn't change, but our sympathies sure did, which was the purpose of the piece.

Trick 5

Building Importance (Changing Impact)

In this technique, things not only appear more or less important, but actually become so. This was also a favorite of Hitchcock in such films as North By Northwest and television series like MacGuyver. In another episode of The Twilight Zone, for example, Mickey Rooney plays a jockey who gets his wish to be big, only to be too large to run the race of a lifetime.

Trick 6

Non-Causality (Out of Context Experiences)

There is often a difference between what an audience expects and what logically must happen. A prime example occurs in the Laurel and Hardy film, *The Music Box*. Stan and Ollie are piano movers. The setup is their efforts to get a piano up a quarter mile flight of stairs to a hillside house. Every time they get to the top, one way or another it slides down to the bottom again. Finally, they get it up there only to discover the address is on the second floor! So, they rig a block and tackle and begin to hoist the piano up to the second floor window. The winch strains, the rope frays, the piano sways. And just when they get the piano up to the window, they push it inside without incident.

After the audience has been conditioned by the multiple efforts to get the piano up the stairs, pushing it in the window without mishap has the audience rolling in the aisles, as they say.

Trick 7

Out of Sequence Experiences (Changing Temporal Relationships)

With this technique, the audience is unaware they are being presented things out of order. Such a story is the motion picture, *Betrayal*, with Ben Kingsley. The story opens and plays through the first act. We come to determine whom we side with and whom we don't: who is naughty and who is nice. Then, the second act begins. It doesn't take long for us to realize that this action actually happened *before* the act we have just seen. Suddenly, all the assumed relationships and motivations of the characters must be re-evaluated, and many of our opinions have to be changed. This happens again with the next act, so that only at the end of the movie are we able to be sure of our opinions about the first act we saw, which was the last act in the story.

Another example is *Pulp Fiction* in which we are at first unaware that things are playing out of order. Only later in the film do we catch on to this, and are then forced to alter our opinions.

Trick 8

Flashbacks and Flash Forwards

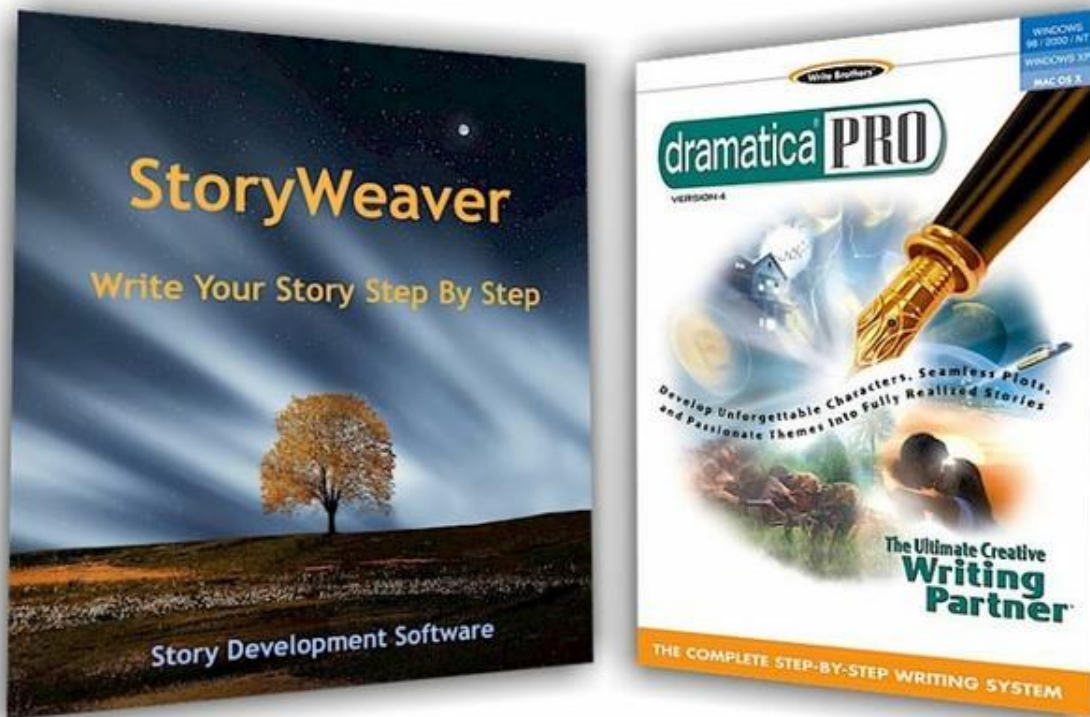
There is a big difference between flashbacks where a character reminisces and flashbacks that simply transport an audience to an earlier time. If the characters are aware of the time shift, it affects their thinking, and is therefore part of the story's structure. If they are not, the flashback is simply a Storyweaving technique engineered to enhance the audience experience.

In the motion picture and book of *Interview With The Vampire*, the story is a structural

flashback, as we are really concerned with how Louis will react once he has finished relating these events from his past. In contrast, in Remains Of The Day, the story is presented out of sequence for the purpose of comparing aspects of the characters lives in ways only the audience can appreciate. Even Pulp Fiction employs that technique once the cat is out of the bag that things are not in order. From that point forward, we are looking for part of the author's message to be *outside* the structure, in the realm of storytelling.

Before we continue, please note all these tips are drawn from our StoryWeaver Step By Step Story Development Software and our Dramatica Story Structure Software.

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Trick 9

Designing Your Plot – Multi Appreciation Moments

The great masters of plot create dramatic moments that multi-task. For example, a novice writer might reveal the story's goal in a line of dialog, but a master storyteller might reveal it in such a way as to also add insight into the speaker's personal issues, the nature of his or her relationship to another character, and also to illustrate an aspect of the story's thematic message.

Stories in which each moment means only one thing are usually not particularly involving as they do not reflect the complexities of real life. Further, with single appreciation moments, there is only one way to appreciate a story. But the great masters of storytelling include so many multi appreciation moments that each time a book is re-read or a movie seen again for the umpteenth time, the focus of the audience attention during the unfolding of the story is never along the exact same path twice.

Each trip through the story opens new insights, provides new experiences, and reveals new surprises as new interpretations and understandings are exposed every time through the journey.

So, to keep your story, be it novel, screenplay, stage play, or even song ballad from being a one-time experience and coming off as a point-by-numbers approach to structure, consider employing multi-appreciation moments in your storytelling to enrich the experience and create an atmosphere worthy of a master storyteller.

Trick 10

Revealing Your Goal

While the structural nature of a story's goal is crucial to developing a plot that makes sense, the storytelling manner in which the goal is revealed can determine whether a plot seems clever or pedestrian. In this tip, we'll explore the impact of some of the key methods of revealing your goal.

Sometimes the goal is spelled out right at the beginning, such as a meeting in which a General tells a special strike unit that a senator's daughter has been kidnapped by terrorists and they must rescue her.

Other times, the goal is hidden behind an apparent goal. So, if your story had used the scene described above, it might turn out that was really just a cover story and in fact, the supposed "daughter" was actually an agent who was assigned to identify and kill a double agent working in the strike team.

Goals may also be revealed slowly, such as in "The Godfather," where it takes the entire film to realize the goal is to keep the family alive by replacing the aging Don with a younger member of the family.

Further, in "The Godfather," as in many Alfred Hitchcock films, the goal is not nearly as

important as the chase or the inside information or the thematic atmosphere. So don't feel obligated to elevate every story point to the same level.

As long as each key story point is there in some way, to some degree of importance, there will be no story hole. You may still have a lot of interest in that story point, however. A character's personal goal, for example, may touch on an issue that you want to explore in greater detail.

When this is the case, let your imagination run wild. Jot down as many instances as come to mind in which the particular plot point comes into play. Such events, moments, or scenarios enrich a story and add passion to a perfunctory telling of the tale.

One of the best ways to do this is to consider how each plot point might affect other plot points, and other story points pertaining to characters, theme, and genre.

For example, each character sees the overall goal as a step in helping them accomplish their personal goals. So, why not create a scenario where a character wistfully describes his personal goal to another character while sitting around a campfire? He can explain how achievement of the overall story goal will help him get what he personally wants.

An example of this is in the John Wayne classic movie, "The Searchers." John Wayne's character asks an old, mentally slow friend to help search for the missing girl. Finding the girl is the overall goal. The friend has a personal goal – he tells Wayne that he just wants a roof over his head and a rocking chair by the fire. This character sees his participation in the effort to achieve the goal as the means of obtaining something he has personally longed for.

And how does your story goal exemplify or affect the moral message of your story as part of the theme? When you see the story goal mentioned in your story synopsis, see if you can incorporate aspects of theme, and when you see theme, try to add a reference to the goal.

In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain has the boy cooking up some food for Tom Sawyer. He puts all the vegetables and meat in the same pan and explain that his pop taught him that food is better when the flavors all "swap around" a bit. The same is true for stories. Don't just speak about goal, speak about goal in reference to as many other story points as you can.

Trick 11

Genre: Revealing Your Story's Personality

Your story's genre is its overall personality. As with the people that you meet, first impressions are very important. In act one, you introduce your story to your reader/audience. The selection of elements you choose to initially employ will set the mood for all that follows. They can also be misleading, and you can use this to your advantage.

You may be working with a standard genre, or trying something new. But it often helps involve your reader/audience if you start with the familiar. In this way, those experiencing your story are eased out of the real world and into the one you have constructed. So, in the first act, you may want to establish a few touch points the reader/audience can hang its hat on.

As we get to know people a little better, our initial impression of the "type" of person they are begins to slowly alter, making them a little more of an individual and a little less of a stereotype. To this end, as the first act progresses, you may want to hint at a few attributes or elements of your story's personality that begin to drift from the norm.

By the end of the first act, you should have dropped enough elements to give your story a general personality type and also to indicate that a deeper personality waits to be revealed.

As a side note, this deeper personality may in fact be the true personality of your story, hidden behind the first impressions.

Trick 12

Character Dismissals

Over the course of the story, your reader/audience has come to know your characters and to feel for them. The story doesn't end when your characters and their relationships reach a climax. Rather, the reader/audience will want to know the aftermath – how it turned out for each character and each relationship. In addition, the audience needs a little time to say goodbye – to let the character walk off into the sunset or to mourn for them before the story ends.

This is in effect the conclusion, the wrap-up. After everything has happened to your

characters, after the final showdown with their respective demons, what are they like? How have they changed? If a character began the story as a skeptic, does it now have faith? If they began the story full of hatred for a mother that abandoned them, have they now made revelations to the effect that she was forced to do this, and now they no longer hate? This is what you have to tell the audience, how their journeys changed them, have they resolved their problems, or not?

And in the end, this constitutes a large part of your story's message. It is not enough to know if a story ends in success or failure, but also if the characters are better off emotionally or plagued with even greater demons, regardless of whether or not the goal was achieved.

You can show what happens to your characters directly, through a conversation by others about them, or even in a post-script on each that appears after the story is over or in the ending credits of a movie.

How you do this is limited only by your creative inspiration, but make sure you review each character and each relationship and provide at least a minimal dismissal for each.

Trick 13

Introducing Characters in Act One

Some stories introduce characters as people and then let the reader/audience discover their roles and relationships afterward. This tends to help an audience identify with the characters.

Other stories put roles first, so that we know about the person by their function and/or job, then get closer to them as the act progresses. This tends to make the reader/audience pigeon-hole the characters by stereotype, and then draw them into learning more about the actual people behind the masks.

Finally, there are stories that introduce character relationships, either situational, structural, or emotional, at the beginning. This causes the audience to see the problems among the characters but not take sides as strongly until they can learn about the people on each side of the relationship, and the roles that constrain them.

Of course, you do not have to treat these introductions equally for all characters and

relationships. For example, you might introduce on character as a person, then introduce their relationship with another character, then divulge the constraints the other character is under due to role, then reveal the other character as a person.

This approach would initially cast sympathy (or derision) at the first character, temper it by showing a relationship with which he or she must contend, then temper that relationship by showing the constraints of the other character, and finally humanize that other character so a true objective balance can be formed by the reader/audience.

Don't forget that first impressions stick in our minds, and it is much easier to judge someone initially than to change that judgment later. Use this trait of audiences to quickly identify important characters up front, or to put their complete situations later, thereby forcing the reader/audience to reconsider its attitudes, and thereby learn and grow.

No matter what approach you take, you have the opportunity to weave a complex experience for your reader/audience, blending factual, logistic information about your characters with the reader/audience emotional experience in discovering this information.

Trick 14

The Big Picture

Although it is important to work on the particulars of your story you can lose track of the big picture in doing so exclusively.

Step back from time to time to take in your story as a whole. See it as the readers or audience will and appreciate it not just for how it works but for how it feels and what it means.

Trick 15

The Collective Goal

Some novice writers become so wrapped up in interesting events and bits of action that they forget to have a central unifying goal that gives purpose to all the other events that take place. This creates a plot without a core.

But determining your story's goal can be difficult, especially if your story is character oriented, and not really about a Grand Quest.

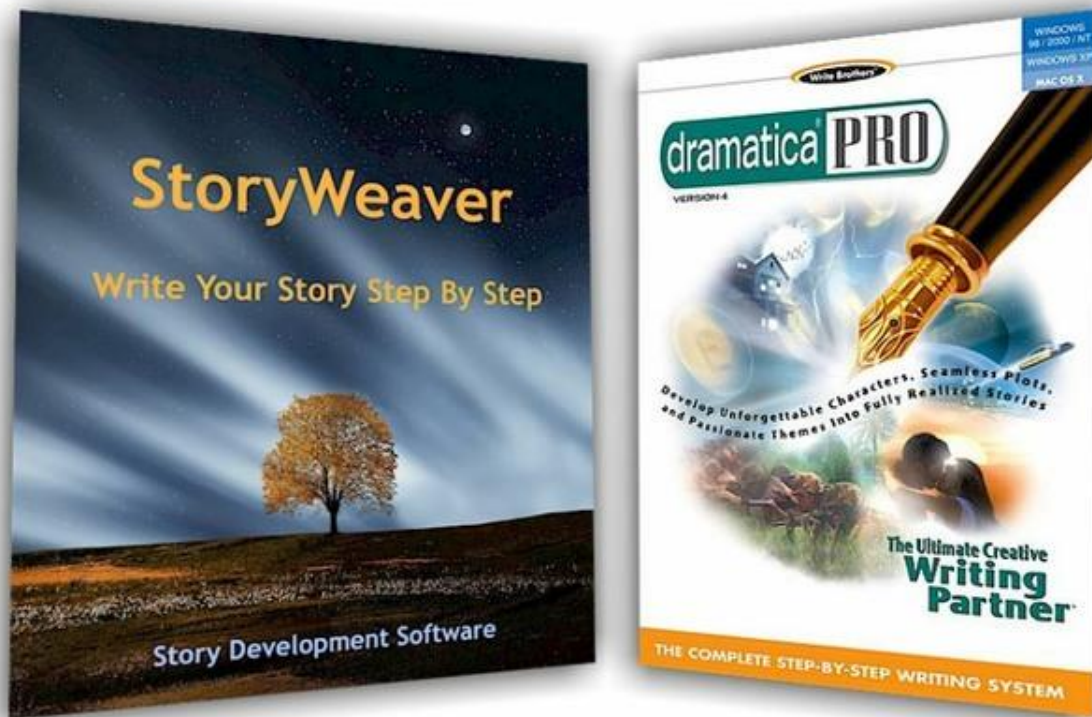
For example, in the movie "Four Weddings and a Funeral," all the characters are struggling with their relationships and not working toward an apparent common purpose. There is a goal, however, and it is to find happiness in a relationship.

This type of goal is called a "Collective Goal" since it is not about trying to achieve the same thing, but the same KIND of thing.

So don't try to force some external, singular purpose on your story if it isn't appropriate. But do find the common purpose in which all your characters share a critical interest.

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Trick 16

Characters' Personal Goals

Personal Goals are the motivating reasons your characters care about and/or participate in the effort to achieve or prevent the overall goal. In other words, they see the main story goal as a means to an end, not as an end itself.

Although a personal goal for each character is not absolutely essential, at some point your audience or readers are going to wonder what is driving each character to brave the trials and obstacles. If you haven't supplied a believable motivation, it will stand out as a story hole. e trials and obstacles. If you haven't supplied a believable motivation, it will stand out as a story hole.

Trick 17

Don't Forget the Requirements!

The achievement or failure to achieve the goal is an important but short moment at the end of the story. So how is interest maintained over the course of the story? By the progress of the quest toward the goal. This progress is measured by how many of the requirements have been met and how many remain.

Requirements can be specific, such as needing to obtain five lost rubies that fit in the idol and unlock the door to the treasure. Or, they can be nebulous, such as needing to reach three progressive states of enlightenment before the dimensional portal will open.

The important thing is that the requirements are clear enough to be easily understood and "marked off the list" as the story progresses.

Trick 18

Creating Extra Tension with Consequences

A goal is what the characters chase, but what chases the characters? The consequence doubles the dramatic tension in a story by providing a negative result if the goal is not achieved.

Consequences may be emotional or logistic, but the more intense they are, the greater the tension. Often it provides greater depth if there are emotional consequences when there is an external goal, and external consequences if there is an emotional goal.

Your story might be about avoiding the consequences or it might begin with the consequences already in place, and the goal is intended to end them.

If the consequences are intense enough, it can help provide motivation for characters who have no specific personal goals.

Trick 19

Success or Failure?

A story without a clear indication of success or failure is a failure with your readers or audience. You need to work out exactly how the audience will know the goal is achieved or not.

This might seem obvious in an action story, but may be much more difficult in a story about character growth.

Success and Failure don't have to be binary choices; they can be matters of degree. For example, the effort to bring back a treasure may fail, but the adventurers discover one large ruby that fell into their pack. Or, someone seeking true love might find love but with someone who is rather annoying.

Whether either of these examples is a partial success or a partial failure depends largely on how you portray the characters' attitudes to the imperfect achievement. To ensure a sense of closure in your readers/audience, make sure they know exactly how things end up on the success/failure scale.

Trick 20

Writing from a Character's Point of View

Perhaps the best way to instill real feelings in a character is to stand in his or her shoes and write from the character's point of view. Unfortunately, this method also holds the greatest danger of undermining the meaning of a story.

As an example, suppose we have two characters, Joe and Tom, who are business competitors. Joe hates Tom and Tom hates Joe. We sit down to write an argument between them. First, we stand in Joe's shoes and speak vehemently of Tom's transgressions. Then, we stand in Tom's shoes and pontificate on Joe's aggressions. By

adopting the character point of view, we have constructed an exchange of honest and powerful emotions. We have also undermined the meaning of our story because Joe and Tom have come across as being virtually the same.

A story might have a Protagonist and an Antagonist, but between Joe and Tom, who is who? Each sees himself as the Protagonist and the other as the Antagonist. If we simply write the argument from each point of view, the audience has no idea which is REALLY which.

The opposite problem occurs if you stand back from your characters and assign roles as Protagonist and Antagonist without considering the characters' points of view. In such a case, the character clearly establish the story's meaning, but they seem to be "walking through" the story, hitting the marks, and never really expressing themselves as actual human beings.

The solution, of course, is to explore both approaches. You need to know what role each character is to play in the story's overall meaning – the big picture. But, you also must stand in their shoes and write with passion to make them human.

Trick 21

Fire Your Protagonist

Many authors start with a Protagonist and then build a cast of characters around him or her. But as a story develops, it may turn out that one of the other characters becomes more suited for that role. Sticking with the original Protagonist causes the story to become mis-centered, and it fails to take on a life of its own.

To see if this has happened to your story, try the following:

Take each of your characters, one by one, and try them out as the Protagonist. Give each a job interview. You ask them, "What would the story's goal be if you were the Protagonist? What would you be working toward? What would you hope to achieve? How would you rally the other characters around your efforts?"

More than likely, you will find one character who seems just a little more driven – a character whose goal seems far more important than any of the others, one that not only affects him but all the other principal characters as well. That character should be your Protagonist, and it may not be the character you originally cast in that role. If it

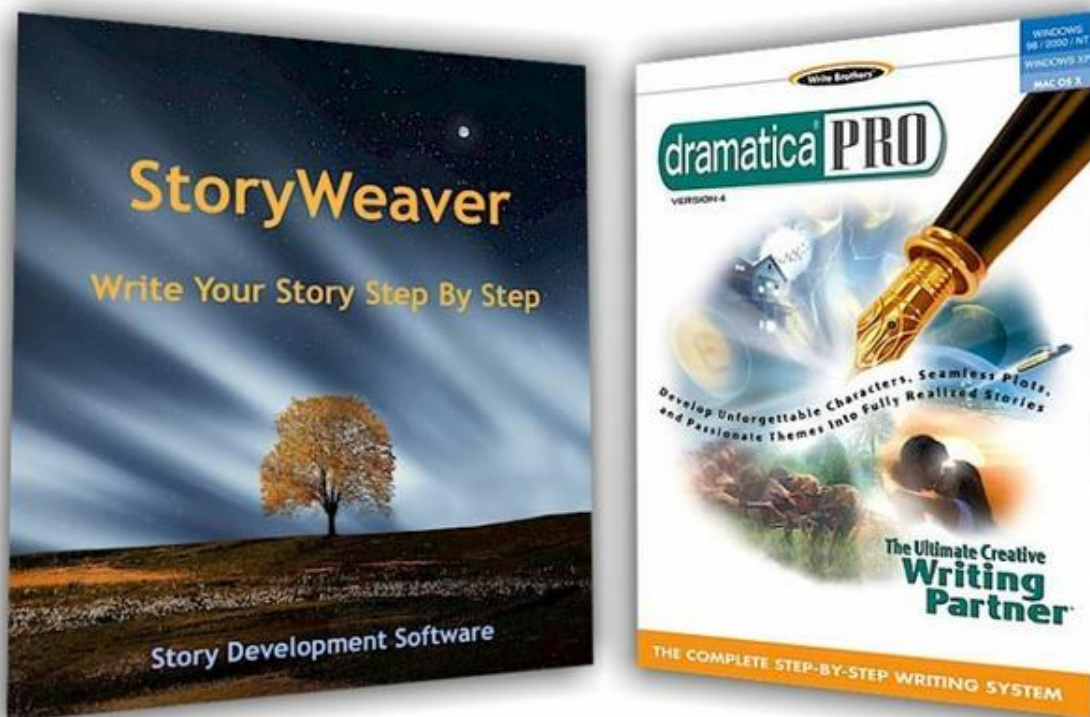
isn't, fire your Protagonist and hire the new one!

Sure, you've become attached to the original character, but if he or she is no longer write for the job, well, business is business. You have to think about what is best for the entire company of players in your story without playing favorites.

Of course, with a new Protagonist, you'll need to re-center your story and possibly to change the nature of the goal. But in so doing, your story will gain a renewed sense of purpose as this new character takes the helm.

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Storytelling Tricks Just For Novelists

Trick 22

Novels Aren't Stories

A novel can be extremely free form. Some are simply narratives about a fictional experience. Others are a collection of several stories that may or may not be intertwined.

Jerzy N. Kosinski (the author of “Being There,” wrote another novel called “Steps.” It contains a series of story fragments. Sometimes you get the middle of a short story, but no middle or end. Sometimes, just the end, and sometimes just the middle.

Each fragment is wholly involving, and leaves you wanting to know the rest of the tale, but they are not to be found. In fact, there is not (that I could find) any connection among the stories, nor any reason they are in that particular order. And yet, they are so passionately told that it was one of the best reads I ever enjoyed.

The point is, don’t feel confined to tell a single story, straight through, beginning to end.

Rather than think of writing a novel, think about writing a book. Consider that a book can be exclusively poetry. Or, as Anne Rice often does, you can use poetry to introduce chapters or sections, or enhance a moment in a story.

You can take time to pontificate on your favorite subject, if you like. Unlike screenplays which must continue to move, you can stop the story and diverge into any are you like, as long as you can hold your reader’s interest.

For example, in the Stephen King novel, “The Tommy Knockers,” he meanders around a party, and allows a character to go on and on... and on... about the perils of nuclear power. Nuclear power has nothing to do with the story, and the conversation does not affect nor advance anything. King just wanted to say that, and did so in an interesting diatribe.

So feel free to break any form you have ever heard must be followed. The most free of all written media is the novel, and you can literally – do whatever you want.

Trick 23

Get Into Your Characters’ Heads

One of the most powerful opportunities of the novel format is the ability to describe

what a character is thinking. In movies or stage plays (with exceptions) you must show what the character is thinking through action and/or dialog. But in a novel, you can just come out and say it.

For example, in a movie, you might say:

John walks slowly to the window and looks out at the park bench where he last saw Sally. His eyes fill with tears. He bows his head and slowly closes the blinds.

But in a novel you might write:

John walked slowly to the window, letting his gaze drift toward the park bench where he last saw Sally. Why did I let her go, he thought. I wanted so much to ask her to stay. Saddened, he reflected on happier times with her – days of more contentment than he ever imagined he could feel.

The previous paragraph uses two forms of expressing a character's thoughts. One, is the direct quote of the thought, as if it were dialog spoken internally to oneself. The other is a summary and paraphrase of what was going on in the character's head.

Most novels are greatly enhanced by stepping away from a purely objective narrative perspective, and drawing the reader into the minds of the character's themselves.

Trick 24

Keep A Daily Log Of Tidbits

One of the biggest differences between a pedestrian novel and a riveting one are the clever little quips, concepts, snippets of dialog, and fresh metaphors.

But coming up with this material on the fly is a difficult chore, and sometimes next to impossible. Fortunately, you can overcome this problem simply by keeping a daily log of interesting tidbits. Each and every day, many intriguing moments cross our paths. Some are notions we come up with on our own; others we simply observe. Since a novel takes a considerable amount of time to write, you are bound to encounter a whole grab bag of tidbits by the time you finish your first draft.

Then, for the second draft, you refer to all that material and drop it in wherever you can to liven up the narrative. You may find that it makes some characters more charismatic, or gives others, who have remained largely silent, something to say. You may discover an opportunity for a sub-plot, a thematic discourse, or the opportunity to get on your soapbox.

What I do is to keep the log at the very bottom of the document for my current novel, itself. That way, since the novel is almost always open on my computer, anything that comes along get appended to the end before it fades from memory.

Also, this allows me to work some of the material into the first draft of the novel while I'm writing it. For example, here are a few tidbits at the bottom of the novel I'm developing right now:

A line of dialog:

"Are you confused yet? No? Let me continue..."

A silly comment:

"None of the victims was seriously hurt." Yeah – they were all hurt in a very funny way.

A character name:

"Farrah Swiel"

A new phrase:

"Tongue pooch"

A notion:

"Theorem ~ Absolute Corruption Empowers Absolutely"

"Corollary ~ There are no good people in positions of power"

I haven't worked these into the story yet, but I will. And it will be richer for it.

Trick 25

Don't Hold Back

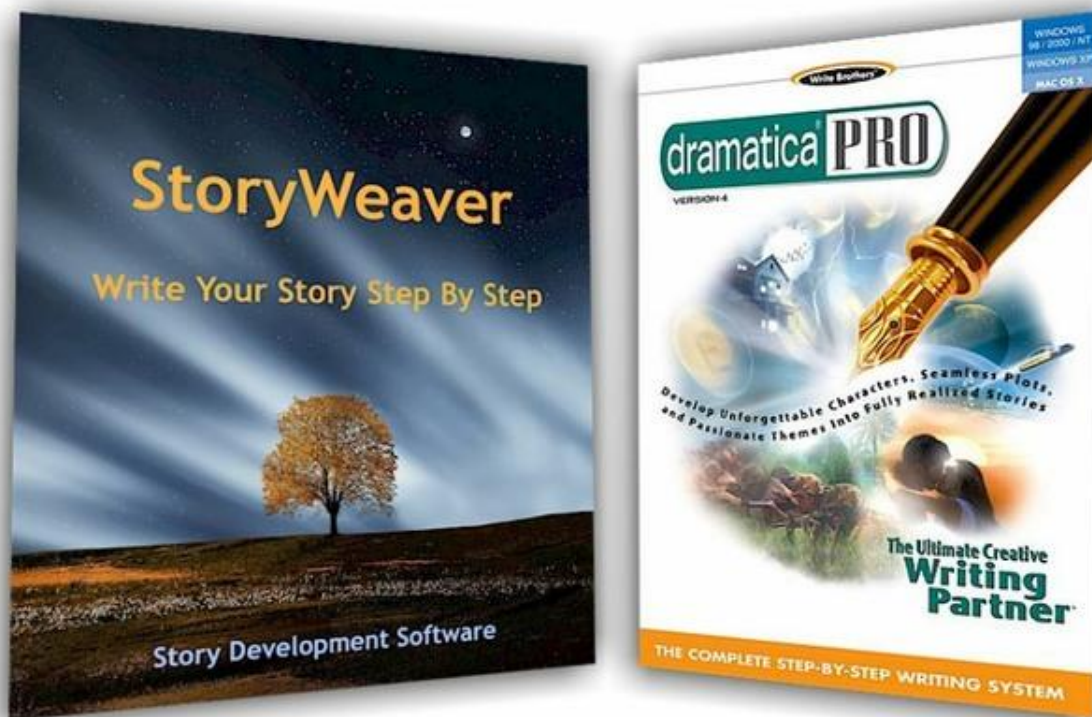
Unlike screenplays, there are no budget constraints in a book. You can write, "The entire solar system exploded, planet at a time," as easily as you can write, "a leaf fell from the tree."

Let your imagination run wild. You can say anything, do anything, break any law, any taboo, any rule of physics. Your audience will follow you anywhere as long as you keep their interest.

So, follow your Muse wherever it leads. No idea is too big or too small. Write about the things you are most passionate about, and it will come through your words, between the lines, and right into the hearts and souls of your readers.

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Storytelling Tricks Just For Screenwriters

Trick 26

Screenwriting 101

Screenplays are blueprints for movies. As such, they are not art, but instructions for creating art. Therefore, there are two things every great screenplay must have: A good story, and a clear and understandable description of how it should be told.

Trick 27

Teaser

Though not absolutely required, it is usually desirable to start your script with a teaser scene. This can be an intense emotional experience, a thrilling bit of action, or an offbeat introduction to a strange world. It might advance the plot, set the theme, and establish the time and location, introduce characters, or just serve as a roller coaster ride to get the audience involved.

Trick 28

Remember your audience

Your audience is the cast, crew, and all the agents, readers, development executives or producers who may become involved in the purchase or production of your script. Your audience is NOT the people sitting in the theater. Like the old game of “telephone,” your purpose is not to tell a story but to tell other how to tell the story. And your purpose is not to impress movie go-ers, but to impress those who decide if your project will get the green light for production.

Trick 29

Don't be overly literary in your scene description

Many production personnel frown on anything but straight-forward prose. The purpose of a screenplay is to tell people how to tell a story, not to tell it yourself. Still and all, successful screenwriters often violate this rule because they can get away with it. And, if you are planning on directing the movie yourself, you may want to capture your intended mood. On the other hand, you don't want those considering your project to be bored, or find your words too dry. So, the concept is to be as efficient as possible in conveying both the information in your story and the feeling of what it will be like on the screen.

Trick 30

Don't get stuck in a genre trap

Genres are guidelines, not rules. List your favorite genres; list your favorite elements in each genre. Then, gather together all the elements you might like to include in your script. Pepper them throughout your screenplay so that your genre develops, rather than being set at the beginning and then stagnating.

Trick 31

Use “Tracking Dialog”

Break up all long speeches into back and forth conversation. Sure, there are exceptions to this, but in general, conversation is far more interesting both in sound and in how it can be presented visually.

Trick 32

Find interesting and believable ways to drop exposition

Have you ever seen one character tell another, “He’s at Dollar-Mart, you know, that big national chain store?” If it were so big and national, the other character would already know this information! One of the best ways to drop exposition is in an argument. You can then exaggerate and bring out information a character might already be expected to know by using it as a weapon. And for simple exposition, try billboards, newspapers, answering machines, photos on mantles, two people talking about a third, and any other technique that doesn’t hit the audience over the head or smack of cliché.

Trick 33

Don’t preach

You should have a message, but don’t present it as a one-sided statement. Rather, show both sides. If you are interested in passing judgment on Greed, also show Generosity. Never put them both in the same scene side by side, but make sure the audience gets to see how well each side does on its own in at least once scene each per act. In the end, the audience will sum up all the instances in which they saw how each side performed, and will draw their own conclusions (that you have craftily led them to).

Trick 34

Give your Main Character a personal issue as well as a goal to accomplish

A story with nothing more than a logistic quest, while perhaps thrilling, is heartless. Your Main Character should grapple with an issue that pressures him or her to consider changing their mind, attitude, or nature in some way, large or small. And don’t just present the personal problem and then resolve it at the end. Unless you argue it (usually through another character who is philosophically or morally opposed to the Main Character’s view) the ultimate change or growth of your Main Character will seem tacked on and contrived.

Trick 35

Characters don't have to change to grow.

They can stick to their guns and grow in their resolve. There are two types of characters, those who change their natures (or minds) in regard to some issue, and those who stick it out and hold on to their views. The obstacles in a story drive a character to the point of change, but whether or not he or she will change is the issue, after all. Sometimes they should change and don't. Other times they shouldn't and do. Each of these presents a different message, and is less overused than the character who should change and does, or shouldn't and doesn't.

Trick 36

There are many kinds of endings

A character might change and resolve their personal angst, yet fail in their quest as a result. Was it worth it? Depends on the degree of angst and the size of the failure. Another character might not resolve their angst; yet by refusing to change accomplish the goal. And even if they do accomplish the goal, it might have been a misguided thing to do, and is actually quite bad that they were successful. The character might not have been aware that the goal was a bad thing, or they might fail to achieve a good thing.

In addition, goals might be partially achieved or only small failures, and a character might resolve only part of their angst, or just slightly increase it.

The flavor of the movie will ultimately depend on how all these elements stack up at the end, and offer you a palette of shadings, rather than just Happy or Sad, and Success or Failure.

Trick 37

Use index cards to work out the scenes in your script

Index cards (3×5 or 5×7 in size) are often used by screenwriters to plan out the sequence of events in their stories. Usually, a script has many different dramatic threads. The trick is how to weave them together over the timeline of the movie. For

example, you might have several key challenges for your hero to overcome. You describe each of these on a different index card. You tack them up on the wall or lay them out on the table (or floor) and stand back and look at them. You see how the action seems to flow from one to another. Perhaps it seems that the ending is a bit anticlimactic, or that the build of dramatic tension isn't right. So, you rearrange the order of the cards until you arrive at an order that feels the best.

Then, you may realize that you actually have a gap in the action that requires the creation of another challenge. So, looking at what comes before and what comes after, you determine the kind of action that is needed, and make a new card to fill the gap.

You might also realize that you have two challenges that are too much alike, or that would happen too close to each other, so you decide to lose one, or combine two into a single one that makes it all the stronger.

Then, you may know that you want a series of arguments between the hero and a love interest. In one creative session, you may work out how many arguments you want, and what each is about. You describe each of these arguments on a different index card.

As with the hero's challenges, you tack up the cards and arrange them in the best possible order, filling gaps with new cards, and deleting or combining cards until the flow is right.

Since a movie generally focuses on one dramatic situation at a time, then intercuts among several different threads as necessary, your next job is to combine both the challenge thread and the argument thread into the overall timeline of your script.

You might decide to start with the first challenge card, then go to the first argument, and alternate. Or you might start with the first argument, have a second argument, and then two challenges in a row.

There are no "rules" as to how the two threads of cards should be shuffled together. It is purely a choice of how you wish to impact your audience.

You may even find that once you have blended the two threads into a single timeline, that combination highlights the need for an additional challenge or another argument, or perhaps the removal of one or the other. You might even be able to see the need for a whole new thread that is suggested once the first two threads are combined. So you create a third set of index cards, put them in order, and then weave them into the other

two.

In this manner, many screenwriters work out the basic beats and flow of their stories so they have a loose blueprint from which to write, and therefore don't get stuck in a logistic corner, or an emotional dead end.

Trick 38

Break up long monologs among several characters

There are some moments in some movies in which a long monolog by a single individual works well. Any inspiring public speech, for example, or when one character holds others transfixed with a tirade or diatribe. But movies are an action medium, and most of the time a long-winded dissertation by one character while the others simply stand and react gets boring very quickly.

To avoid this, take your longer speeches and distribute the material to one or more additional characters. It is far more interesting to see what everyone has to say on the issue, than to see what one person has to say.

Think about real life situations. Aside from presentations and reports in a business situation, or structured events such as a ceremony, no one thinks well of someone who hogs the conversation. Let your characters make their point, then let someone else have a turn. Good examples of this can be found in the original Howard Hawk's production of "The Thing," and also in "The Big Chill," both of which have extensive exposition and opinion, but no one says more than a few lines at a time before another chimes in with his two cents' worth.

The exceptions, of course, is when someone gets all wrapped up in his own rhetoric, as when an individual muses, reminisces, waxes poetic, or proclaims a higher truth with fire in his eyes. People don't mind if a good storyteller talks forever. Look at the long pontifications of the characters in "Network." But even these are handled as special moments, and the ebb and flow of normal conversation continues in between, serving both to break up the monotony, and also to uplift the long passages by contrast.

Trick 39

Use "Red Herrings"

The old expression, “A Red Herring,” means something that is intentionally misleading. In screenplays, a red herring is a scene, which is set up intentionally to mislead an audience.

One example is in the movie, “The Fugitive,” with Harrison Ford as Dr. Richard Kimble. He escapes from the prison bus, gets some street clothes, and is on the run.

He waits under a bridge and when an associate that he worked with stops his car for a red light, Kimble steps out and pretends to be a homeless person trying to wash his windshield for a buck. He uses this action as a “cover” while he holds a conversation with the associate to get some information and help.

In the background, out of focus, a police car slowly approach behind the associate’s car. You don’t see it at first because you are concentrating on the conversation. The police car stops. Suddenly, it’s lights and siren comes on. The audience is sure the jig is up. Kimble turns to look at it, and the police car whips around the associate’s car and takes off for some call it received.

The initial impression was that Kimble was about to be recaptured because the cops had recognized him. The “reality” was that they were just on patrol, got a call, and sped off with sirens wailing.

Red Herrings can be used for anything from the momentary shock value as above, to making a bad guy appear to be a good guy.

To make it work, you have to do two primary things:

1. Don’t leave out essential information or the audience will feel manipulated. Tricking your audience by misleading them is fun for them. But if you fool them by leaving out information they would legitimately have expected to be told about, then you are just screwing with them.

Red herrings are best accomplished by having information that is taken in one context and then the context is changed. This way, you aren’t holding back, you are just changing the perspective.

Your audience invests its emotions in your story. You don’t want to violate them. As an example, there is an old joke about a nurse in a maternity ward who comes in to a

mother's room carrying the new baby. She trips and falls and the baby hits the floor. Then, she gets mad at it for falling, picks it up, swings it around and bashes it against the wall. The mother is in hysterics. The nurse picks up the kid and says, "April Fool – it was born dead." Don't do this to your audience.

A better approach is to see a mom yank her child by the arm in a very abusive way while walking down the street. First reaction is she is an ogre and you run to stop her. Just then, you see the truck come whipping around the corner that would've hit and killed the child, and you stop in your tracks realizing the mom was saving his life. You look again, and she is hugging and holding him, and she is crying because he was almost lost, and because she startled him. ^[1]_[SEP]Psychologists call it "Primary Attribution Error," and you can use it to your advantage. If done properly, they will love you for it.

2. Don't change the rules of the game just to make things happen another way or the audience will feel that you lied to them.

The audience will give you their trust. They expect that what you tell them is the truth. They build on each bit of information, trying to understand the big picture.

You can easily change context to show something in a different light, but don't tell them one thing and then simply say, "Oh that wasn't true, I was just messing with you."

That is a sure way to lose their trust, and once lost, you'll never get it back.

Trick 40

Don't say it if you can show it

Movies are a visual medium. The strongest impact is created by what is seen, not what is said. Although we might marvel at well-written dialog, it is the moving shadows that capture our imagination.

Before writing a dialog scene, consider the information you are trying to convey. Consider visual alternatives that would show the audience rather than tell them. Even character development can often be more effective by seeing what the character does, rather than listening to what he or she says.

If you do need to say it, try to create a visually interesting situation in which the dialog can occur. I once had to do an interview on a big-budget industrial film with a geologist about drilling for bauxite samples 50 miles outside of Van Horn Texas in the middle of a desert.

I could have just gone to the site, set up the camera, and filmed him in front of the rig. But when he picked me up at the airstrip, he was in a dusty, beat-up pickup truck, and headed down the rough dirt road at literally 100 miles an hour.

I took out the camera and did the entire interview while bouncing around in the cab. When we arrived at the site, I simply shot a lot of silent footage of the goings on. When we cut it all together, we began with the truck interview, and then cut away to the various aspects of the job as the geologist spoke. It created a riveting three-minute sequence and pleased the client immensely.

So if you have dialog to deliver and you can't really communicate the information in a visual way, consider changing the location or engaging your characters in some activity that will at least add a visual element.

You might have them conversing during one-on-one basketball, while doing yard work, chasing after a dog that needs a bath – whatever. And if all else fails, don't ignore the potential of a cheap cinematic trick.

You can do a scene completely in silhouette, seen from the POV of a goldfish in a bowl, from another room as a janitor stops to listen and then continues with his cleaning.

You can even get overt. There was a television program many years ago called "Then Came Bronson," starring Michael Parks. It was noted for trying new visual techniques. For one long dialog conversation, the director shot the two characters from the side, walking along a sidewalk across the street. He shot them silent in several locations with different backgrounds, always the same distance away, walking at the same pace. In the editing room, he cut from one location to the next so that it appeared as if the characters were continuing to walk and the background jumped from one to another behind them. The dialog was then added over the sequence as a whole.

This simple technique gave power to an otherwise uninteresting scene, added the impression that they had been talking for a long walk all over town, but got the verbal information across as concisely as possible. So look for visual opportunities to enliven dialog, and if there aren't any, make them.

Trick 41

Drop exposition through arguments

Here's a short one... A person talking is often boring. People arguing are often compelling. If you have to drop exposition, try to do it in the back and forth barbs of an argument. Let the characters use the information you need to convey as barbs in their back and forth attacks. Then your story won't grind to a halt just because you need to tell your audience something.

Storytelling Tricks for Multi-Story Ensemble Series and Soap Operas

Trick 42

Subplots

The least complex form of the Multi-Story Ensemble Series employs the use of subplots. Subplots are tales or stories drawn with less resolution than the principal story. They hinge on one of the principal story's characters other than the Main Character. This hinge character becomes the Main Character of the subplot story.

Subplots are never essential to the progression of the principal plot and only serve to more fully explore issues tangential to the principal story's argument. "Tangent" is a good word to use here, as it describes something that touches upon yet does not interfere with something else.

Subplots may begin at any time during the course of the principal story, but should wrap up just before the principal climax, or just after in the denouement (author's proof).

Trick 43

Relationships of Subplots to Plot

Since subplots are essentially separate stories, they may or may not reflect the values and concerns of the principal story. This allows an author to complement or counterpoint the principal argument. Frequently a subplot becomes a parallel of the principal story in another storytelling context, broadening the scope of the principal argument by inference to include all similar situations. In contrast, the subplot may arrive at the opposite conclusion, indicating that the solution for one storytelling

situation is not universally appropriate.

There can be as many subplots in a story as time allows. Each one, however, must hinge on a character who is essential to the principal story (as opposed to a character merely created for storytelling convenience). Each character can only head up a single subplot, just as the Main Character of the principal story cannot carry any additional subplots. However, the Main Character can (and often does) participate in a subplot as one of its objective characters.

Trick 44

Multi-Story Formats

Other than subplots, Multi-Story Series can contain several stories that are not related at all. In this case, there may be two or more completely independent sets of characters who never cross paths. Or an author may choose to interweave these independent stories so that the characters come into contact, but only in an incidental way. In a sense, this form is sort of a “spatial anthology” wherein multiple stories are told not in succession but simultaneously.

Perhaps the most complex form of the Multi-Story Ensemble Series is when both subplots and separate stories are employed. Often, the subplots and the separate stories both use the principal story’s characters as well as characters that do not come into play in the principal story.

Trick 45

Stretching Time

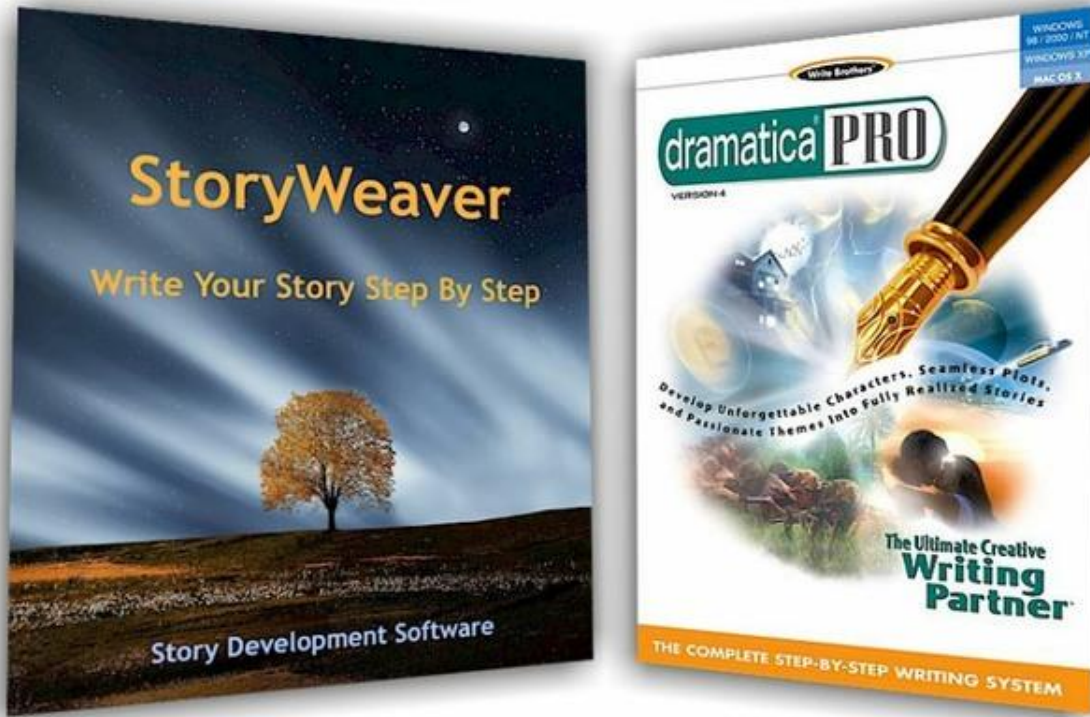
An over-abundance of storytelling becomes difficult to conclude within the limits of even a one-hour show. Therefore, single episodes can be treated more like acts with stories sometimes running over four or more episodes. Each episode might also contain subplots staggered in such a way that more than one may conclude or begin in the middle of another subplot which continues over several episodes.

Obviously, a lot of cross-dynamics can be going on here. It is the author’s job as storyteller to make sure the audience is aware at all times as to which story or subplot they are seeing and what the character’s roles are in each context. This is essential,

since no internal storyform is controlling all of the independent stories. They are held together here only by the connective tissue of storytelling.

A reminder that all these tips are drawn from our StoryWeaver Step By Step Story Development Software and our Dramatica Story Structure Software.

[Click here for details and try either or both risk-free for 90 days!](#)



A Grab Bag of Tricks for All Media

Trick 46

The Rule of Threes

Many rules and guidelines work fine until you sit down to write. As soon as you get inspired, creative frenzy takes over and the muse bolts forward like a mad bull. But there is one rule of thumb that sticks out like a sore thumb: the Rule of Threes.

Interactions and the Rule of Threes

Characters represent dramatic functions which need to interact to reflect all sides of solving the story problem. The first interaction sets the relationship between the two characters. The second interaction brings them into conflict. The third interaction demonstrates which one fare better, establishing one as more appropriate than the other.

This is true between Protagonist and Antagonist, Protagonist and Skeptic, Skeptic and Sidekick — in short, between all essential characters in a story. A good guide while writing is to arrange at least three interactions between each pairing of characters. In this manner, the most concise, yet complete portrayal can be made of essential storyform dynamics.

Introductions

Each of the characters must be introduced before the three interactions occur, and they must be dismissed after the three interactions are complete. These two functions set-up the story and then disband it, much like one might put up a grandstand for a parade and then tear it down after the event is over. This often makes it feel like there are five acts in a story when three are truly dynamic acts and two have been “borrowed” from the structure.

The introduction of characters is so well known that it is often forgotten by the author. A character’s intrinsic nature must be illustrated *before* he interacts with any of the Objective Characters. This is so basic that half the time it doesn’t happen and the story suffers right from the start. (Keep in mind that an author can use storytelling to “fool” his audience into believing a character has a given nature, only to find out it made assumptions based on too little information in the wrong context.)

Introductions can be on-camera or off. They can be in conversation about a character, reading a letter that character wrote, seeing the way they decorate their apartment — anything that describes their natures.

Dismissals

The Rule of Threes should be applied until all of the primary characters are played against each other to see what sparks are flying. Once we get the picture, it is time to dismiss the company. Dismissals can be as simple as a death or as complex as an open-ended indication of the future for a particular character. When all else fails, just before the ending crawl a series of cards can be shown: “Janey Schmird went on to become a

New Age messiah while holding a day job as a screenplay writer.”

The point is, the audience needs to say good-bye to their new friends or foes.

Trick 47

Avoiding the Genre Trap

A common misconception sees genre as a fixed list of dramatic requirements or a rigid structural template from which there can be no deviation. Writers laboring under these restrictions often find themselves boxed-in creatively. They become snared in the Genre Trap, cranking out stories that are indistinguishable from a whole crop of their contemporaries

In fact, genre should be a fluid and organic entity that grows from each story individually. Such stories are surprising, notable, memorable, and involving. In this article, you'll learn a new flexible technique for creating stories that are unique within their genres.

How We Fall Into the Genre Trap

The first step in escaping from the Genre Trap is to understand how we fall into it in the first place. Consider how wrapped up you become in the details of your story. You slave over every plot point, struggle to empathize with every one of your characters, and perhaps even grieve over the effort to instill a passionate theme.

The problem is, you become so buried in the elements of your story that you lose sight of what it feels like as a whole. So while every piece may work individually, the overall impact may be fragmented, incomplete, or inconsistent. To avoid this, we fall back on “proven” structures of successful stories in a similar genre. We cut out parts of our story that don't fit that template, and add new sections to fill the gaps. We snip and hammer until our story follows along the dotted lines.

And lo and behold, we have fallen into the genre trap – taking our original new idea and making it just like somebody else's old idea. Sure, the trappings are different. Our characters have different names. The big battle between good and evil takes place in a roller rink instead of a submarine. But underneath it all, the mood, timber, and feel of our story is just like the hundred others stamped out in the same genre mold.

A New Definition of Genre

Rather than thinking of your story as a structure, a template, or a genre, stand back a bit and look at your story as it appears to your reader or audience. To them, every story has a personality of its own, almost as if it were a human being. From this perspective, stories fall into personality types, just like real people.

When you meet someone for the first time, you might initially classify them as a Nerd, a Bully, a Wisecracker, a Philanthropist, or a Thinker.

These, of course, are just first impressions, and if you get the chance to spend some time with each person, you begin to discover a number of traits and quirks that set them apart from any other individual in that personality type.

Similarly, when you encounter a story for the first time, you likely classify it as a Western, a Romance, a Space Opera, or a Buddy Picture. Essentially, you see the personality of the story as a Stereotype.

At first, stories are easy to classify because you know nothing about them but the basic broad strokes. But as a story unfolds, it reveals its own unique qualities that transform it from another faceless tale in the crowd to a one-of-a-kind experience with its own identity.

At least, that is what it ought to do. But if you have fallen into the Genre Trap, you actually edit out all the elements that make your story different and add others that make it the same. All in the name of the Almighty Genre Templates.

How to Avoid the Genre Trap

Avoiding the Genre Trap is not only easy, but creatively inspiring as well! The process can begin at the very start of your story's development (though you can apply this technique for re-writes as well).

Step One – Choosing Genres:

Make a list of all the Stereotypical Genres that have elements you might want to include in the story you are currently developing. For example, you might want to consider

aspects of a Western, a Space Opera, a Romance, and a Horror Story.

Step Two – Listing Genre Elements:

List all the elements of each of these genres that intrigue you in general. For example:

Western – Brawl in the Saloon, Showdown Gunfight, Chase on Horseback, Lost Gold Mine, Desert, Indians.

Space Opera – Time Warp, Laser Battle, Exploding Planet, Alien Race, Spaceship Battle, Ancient Ruins.

Romance – Boy Meets Girl, Boy Loses Girl, Boy Gets Girl, Misunderstanding alienates Boy and Girl, Rival for Girl throws out Misinformation, Last Minute Reveal of the Truth leading to Joyful Reunion.

Horror Story – Series of Grizzly and Inventive Murders, The Evil Gradually Closes in on the Heroes, Scary Isolated Location, Massive Rainstorm with Lightning and Thunder.

(Note that some genre elements are about setting, some about action, and some about character relationships. That's why it is so hard to say what genre is. And it is also why looking at genre, as a story's Personality Type is so useful.

Step Three – Selecting Genre Elements:

From the lists of elements you have created, pick and choose elements from each of the genres that you might like to actually include in your story.

For example, from Western you might want Lost Gold Mine, Desert, and Indians. From Space Opera you might choose Spaceship Battle, Exploding Planet and Alien Race. Romance would offer up all the elements you had listed: Boy Meets Girl, Boy Loses Girl, Boy Gets Girl, Misunderstanding alienates Boy and Girl, Rival for Girl throws our Misinformation, Last Minute Reveal of the Truth leading to Joyful Reunion. And finally, from Horror Story you might select Scary Isolated Location, Massive Rainstorm with Lightning and Thunder.

Step Four – Cross Pollinating Genres:

From this Master List of Genre Elements that you might like to include in your story, see if any of the elements from one genre have a tie-in with those from another genre.

For example, Indians from the Western and Alien Race from the Space Opera could become a race of aliens on a planet that share many of the qualities of the American Indian. And, the relationship between the boy and the girl easily becomes a Romeo and Juliet saga of a human boy colonizing the planet who falls in love with an alien girl.

Step Five – Peppering Your Story with Genre Elements:

Once you've chosen your elements and cross-pollinated others, you need to determine where in your story to place them. If you are stuck in a Genre Trap, there is a tendency to try and get all the genre elements working right up front so that the genre is clear to the reader/audience.

This is like trying to know everything there is to discover about a person as soon as you meet him or her. It is more like a resume than an introduction. The effect is to overload the front end of the story with more information than can be assimilated, and have nowhere left to go when the reader/audience wants to get to know the story's personality better as the story unfolds.

So, make a timeline of the key story points in your plot. Add in any principal character moments of growth, discovery, or conflict. Now, into that timeline pepper the genre elements you have developed for your story.

For example, you might decide to end with a massive spaceship battle, or you could choose to open with one. The information about the Alien Race being like the American Indians might be right up front in the Teaser, or you could choose to reveal it in the middle of the second act as a pivotal turning point in the story.

Because genre elements are often atmospheric in nature, they can frequently be placed just about anywhere without greatly affecting the essential flow of the plot or the pace of character growth.

As you look at your timeline, you can see and control the reader's first impressions of the story genre. And you can anticipate the ongoing mood changes in your story's feel as additional elements in its personality are revealed, scene-by-scene or chapter-by-chapter.

What about Re-writes?

Not everyone wants to start a story with genre development. In fact, you might want to go through an entire draft and then determine what genre elements you'd like to add to what you already have.

The process is the same. Just list the genres that have elements you might wish to include. List the elements in each that intrigue you. Select the ones that would fit nicely into your story. Cross-Pollinate where you can. Pepper them into your existing timeline to fill gaps where the story bogs down and to reveal your story as a unique personality.

Summing Up the Sum of the Parts

Genre is part setting, part action, part character, and part story-telling style. Trying to follow a fixed template turns your story into just another clone. But by recognizing that genre is really a story's personality type, you can make it as individual as you like. And by peppering your elements throughout your story's timeline, you will create first impressions that will capture your reader or audience and then hold their interest as your story's one-of-a-kind personality reveals itself.

Trick 48

Genre – Act by Act

Many writers have a misconception that genre is something you “write in” – like a box. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Genre is the overall mood of a story, created through structural and storytelling elements and approaches.

This mood isn't simply set at the beginning of the story and then continued through the conclusion. Rather, the elements of genre are sprinkled into the story, establishing an initial mood, and then developing it over the course of the entire story.

Genre in Act One

Your story's genre is its overall personality. As with the people that you meet, first impressions are very important. In act one, you introduce your story to your reader/audience. The selection of elements you choose to initially employ will set the mood for all that follows. They can also be misleading, and you can use this to your

advantage.

You may be working with a standard genre, or trying something new. But it often helps involve your reader/audience if you start with the familiar. In this way, those experiencing your story are eased out of the real world and into the one you have constructed. So, in the first act, you may want to establish a few touch points the reader/audience can hang its hat on.

As we get to know people a little better, our initial impression of the “type” of person they are begins to slowly alter, making them a little more of an individual and a little less of a stereotype. To this end, as the first act progresses, you may want to hint at a few attributes or elements of your story’s personality that begin to drift from the norm.

By the end of the first act, you should have dropped enough elements to give your story a general personality type and also to indicate that a deeper personality waits to be revealed.

As a side note, this deeper personality may in fact be the true personality of your story, hidden behind the first impressions.

Genre in Act Two

In the second act, your story’s genre personality develops more specific traits or elements that shift it completely out of the realm of a broad personality type and into the realm of the individual. Your reader/audience comes to expect certain things from your story, both in the elements and in the style with which they are presented.

If the first impression of your story as developed in act one is a true representation of the underpinnings of your story’s personality, then act two adds details and richness to the overall feel over the story. But if the first impression is a deception, hiding beneath it a different story personality, then act two brings elements to the surface that reveal the basic nature of its true personality.

Genre in Act Three

It is the third act where you will either reveal the final details that make your story’s personality unique as an individual, or will reveal the full extent of its true personality that was masked behind the first impressions of the first act, and hinted at in the

second.

Either way, by the end of the third act you want your reader/audience to feel as if the story is an old friend or an old enemy – a person they understand as to who it is by nature, and what it is capable of.

Genre Conclusion

If you've ever seen the end of a science fiction movie where the world is saved, the words "The End" appear, and then a question mark appears, you have experienced a last-minute change in the personality of a story's genre.

In the conclusion, you can either re-affirm the personality you have so far revealed, alter it at the last moment, or hint that it may be altered. For example, in the original movie "Alien," there are several red herrings in the end of act three that alternately make it look as if Ripley or the Alien will ultimately triumph. In the conclusion of Alien, the Alien has been apparently vanquished, and Ripley puts herself in suspended animation for the long return home. But the music, which has been written to initially convey a sense that danger is over suddenly takes a subtle turn toward the minor chords and holds them, making us feel that perhaps a hidden danger still lurks. Finally, the music returns to a sustained major chord as the ship disappears in the distance, confirming that indeed, the danger has past.

Keep in mind that your reader/audience will need to say goodbye to the story they have come to know. Just as they needed to be introduced to the story's personality in act one and drawn out of the real world into the fictional one, now they need to be disentangled from the story's personality and eased back into the real world.

Just as one wraps up a visit with a friend in a gradual withdrawal, so too you must let your reader/audience down gently, always considering that the last moments your reader/audience spends with your story will leave a final impression even more important than the first impression.

Trick 49

Genre: Revealing Your Story's Personality

Your story's genre is its overall personality. As with the people that you meet, first impressions are very important. In act one, you introduce your story to your

reader/audience. The selection of elements you choose to initially employ will set the mood for all that follows. They can also be misleading, and you can use this to your advantage.

You may be working with a standard genre, or trying something new. But it often helps involve your reader/audience if you start with the familiar. In this way, those experiencing your story are eased out of the real world and into the one you have constructed. So, in the first act, you may want to establish a few touch points the reader/audience can hang its hat on.

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By the end of the first act, you should have dropped enough elements to give your story a general personality type and also to indicate that a deeper personality waits to be revealed.

As a side note, this deeper personality may in fact be the true personality of your story, hidden behind the first impressions.

Trick 50

Characters – The Attributes of Age

Introduction

Writers tend to create characters that are more or less the same age as themselves. On the one hand, this follows the old adage that one should write about what one knows. But in real life, we encounter people of all ages in most situations. Of course, we often see stories that pay homage to the necessary younger or older person, but we just as often find gaps of age groups in which there are no characters at all, rather than a smooth spectrum of ages.

In addition, there are many considerations to age other than the superficial appearance, manner of dress, and stereotypical expectations. In this lesson we’re going to uncover a variety of traits that bear on an accurate portrayal of age, and even offer the opportunity to explore seldom-depicted human issues associated with age.

The Attributes of Age

People in general, and writers in particular, tend to stereotype the attributes of age more than just about any other character trait. There are, of course, the physical aspects of age, ranging from size, smoothness of skin, strength, mobility to the various ailments associated with our progress through life. Then there are the mental and emotional qualities that we expect to find at various points in life. But the process of aging involves some far more subtle components to our journey through life.

Anatomical vs. Chronological age

Before examining any specific traits, it is important to note the difference between anatomical and chronological age. Anatomical age is the condition of your body whereas chronological age is the actual number of years you've been around. For example, if you are thirty years old, but all worn out and genetically biased to age prematurely, you might look more akin to what people would expect of a fifty year old. Nonetheless, you wouldn't have the same interests in music or direct knowledge of the popular culture as someone who was actually fifty years old. When describing a character, you might choose to play off your reader expectations by letting them assume the physical condition, based on your description of age. Or, you might wish to create some additional interest in your character by describing it as "A middle-aged man so fit and healthy, he was still "carded" whenever he vacationed in Vegas." Such a description adds an element of interest and immediately sets your character out as an individual.

Jargon

Far too often, characters are portrayed as speaking in the same generic conversational language we hear on television. The only variance to that is the overlay of ethnic buzzwords to our standard sanitized TV through template. In other words, characters act as if they all through alike, even if they had completely different cultural upbringings. But aging is an ongoing evolution of culture, rooting the individual into thought patterns of his or her formative years, and tempered (to some degree) by the ongoing cultural indoctrination of a social lifestyle.

Characters, therefore, tend to pick up a basic vocabulary reflective of both their ethnicity AND their age. For example, a black man who fought for civil rights along side Dr. Martin Luther King, would not be using the same jargon as a black man advancing the cause of rights today. And neither of these would use the same vocabulary as a young black man in the center city, trying to find his way out through education. To simply overlay the "black jargon" template on such characters is the same kind of

unconscious subtle prejudice promoted by “flesh colored” crayons.

Sure, we all learn to drop some of the more dated terms and expletives of our youth in order to appear “hip” or “with it,” but in the end we either sound silly trying to use the new ones, or avoid them altogether, leaving us bland and un-passionate in our conversation. Both of these approaches can be depicted in your characters as well, and can provide a great deal of information about the kind of mind your character possesses.

Outlook

Speaking of character minds, we all have a culturally created filter that focuses our attention on some things, and blinds us to (or diminishes) others. Sometimes, this is built into the language itself. When it is hot, the Spanish say, “*hace calor*” (it makes heat). This phrasing is due to the underlying beliefs of the people who developed that language that see every object, even those that are inanimate, as possessing a spirit. So, when it is hot, this is not a mindless state of affairs due to meteorological conditions, but rather to the intent of the spirit of the weather. Of course, if you were to ask a modern Spanish speaking person if they believed in such a thing, you would likely receive a negative reply. And yet, because this concept permeates the language (*making everyday items masculine or feminine*), it cannot help but alter the way native speakers of the language will frame their thoughts.

As another example, the Japanese population of world war two was indoctrinated in the culture of honor, duty, and putting the needs of society above those of the individual. Although most countries foster this view, in war-time Japan, it was carried to the extreme, resulting in an effective Kamikaze force, and also in whole units that chose a suicidal charge against oncoming forces, rather than to be humiliated by defeat or capture.

Corporate Japan was built around these Samurai ideals, and workers commonly perceived themselves as existing to serve their companies with loyalty and unquestioning obedience. But when the economy faltered, those who expected to remain with their companies for life were laid off, or even permanently fired. This led to a disillusionment of the “group first” mentality, especially among the young, who had not yet become settled in their beliefs. So, today, there is still a gap between the old-guard corporate executives, and the millions of teenagers to whom they market. Age, in this case, creates a significant difference in the way the world looks.

Continuing with the notion of generation gaps, I grew up when the rallying cry was

“Don’t trust anyone over 30.” Of course, now we’re all in our fifties or even sixties, so we are forced to admit that we, ourselves, have in fact become “the Establishment.”

But that is what is visible and obvious to us. The real difference between my generation and the post Yuppie, post GenX, GenY, Gen? Generation is far more foundational. In conversations with my daughter I discovered that while I see myself on the other side of the generation gap, she does not perceive one at all! This is due to primarily to the plethora of high-quality recorded media programs, which capture so many fine performances and presentations when the artists and great thinkers were in their prime. We live in a TV Land universe in which no great works ever die; they are just reborn on Cable.

To my daughter’s generation, it is only important whether or not you have something worth saying. How old you are has nothing to do with your importance or relevance. In short, the difference between my generation and the younger generation is that we perceive a difference between the generations and they don’t!

In summary then, the age in which you establish your worldview will determine how you perceive current events for the rest of your life. When creating characters of any particular age, you would do well to consider the cultural landscape that was prevalent when each character was indoctrinated.

Comfort Symbols

We all share the same human emotional needs. And we each experience moments that fulfill those needs. Those experiences become fond memories, and many of the trappings of those experiences become comfort symbols. In later life, we seek out those symbols to trigger the re-experiencing of the cherished moments. Perhaps your family served a particular food in your childhood that you associate with warmth and love. For example, my mother grew up during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Her family was often short of food. So, as a snack, they would give her a piece of bread spread with lard and mustard! Now the thought very nearly sickens me, but she often yearned for that flavor again, as it reminded her of the love she received as a child.

Once we have locked into symbols that we can use to trigger emotional experiences, we seldom need to replace them. They are our comfort symbols upon which we can always rely. This has two effects as we age: One, we latch on to performers and music, as an example, that age along with us. We recall them at their prime when we first encountered them, and also have spent years aging along with them. This leads us to suddenly wake up one day and realize we no longer know who they are referring to in

popular culture magazines and entertainment reporting televisions shows. In other words, the popular culture has passed us by. Two, we see many of our symbols (favorite advertising campaigns, a restaurant where we went on our first date, etc.) vanish as they are replaced with new and current concerns. So, the world around us seems less relevant, less familiar, and less comfortable, just as we seem to the world at large.

When creating characters, take into account the potential ongoing and growing sense of loss, sadness, and connection between characters and their environment. And don't think this is a problem only for the elderly. My 24-year-old son laments that there are kids growing up today who never knew a world without personal computers! He says it makes him feel old.

Physical Attributes

Babies have a soft spot on their heads that doesn't harden up for quite a while after birth. Cartilage wears out. Teens in puberty have raging hormones. Young kids grow so fast that they don't have a chance to get used to the size and strength of their bodies before they have changed again, not unlike trying to drive a new and different car every day. I can't remember the last time I ran full-tilt. I'm not sure it would be safe, today! Point is, our bodies are always changing. Sometimes the state we are in has positive and/or negative qualities – other times the changing itself is positive or negative.

When creating characters, give some thought to the physical attributes and detriments of any given age, and consider how they not only affect the abilities and mannerisms of your characters, but their mental and emotional baselines as well.

Conclusion?

Sure, we could go on and on exploring specifics of age and aging, but since it is a pandemic human condition, it touches virtually every human experience and endeavor. The point here is not to completely cover the subject, but to encourage you to consider it when creating each of your characters. It isn't enough to simply describe a character as "a middle-aged man," or "a perky 8 year old boy." You owe it to your characters and to your readers or audience to incorporate the aging experience into their development, just as it is inexorably integrated into our own.

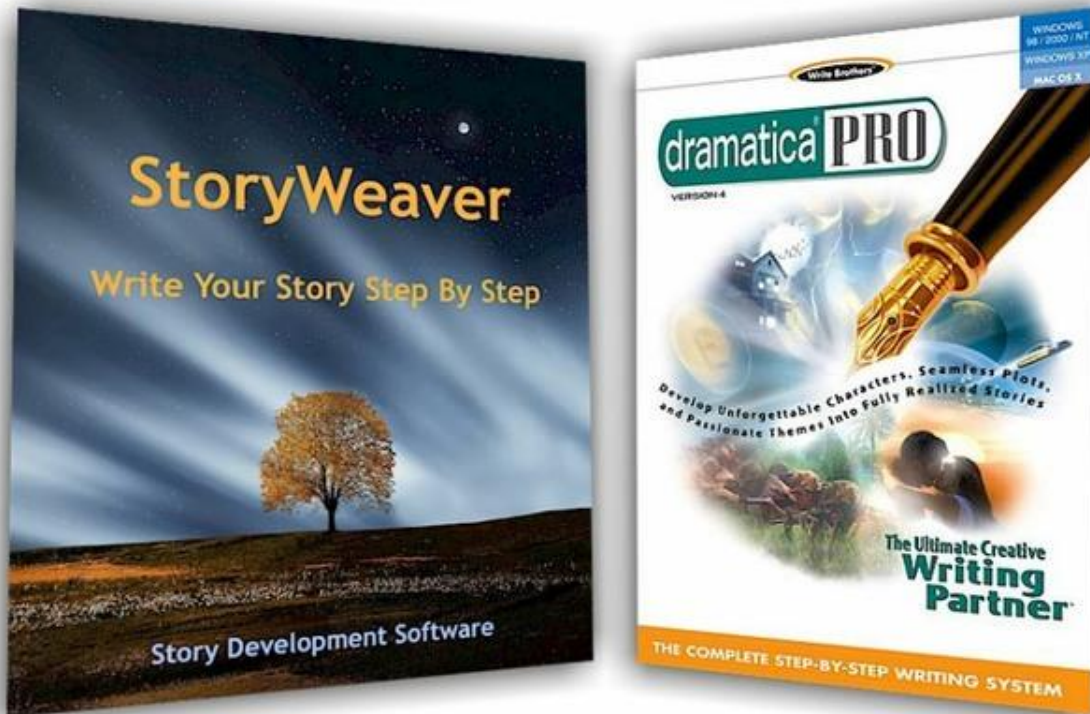
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