

CHAPTER 1: CHECKPOINT ✓

Do we know whose story it is? There must be someone through whose eyes we are viewing the world we've been plunked into—aka the protagonist. Think of your protagonist as the reader's surrogate in the world that you, the writer, are creating.

Is something happening, beginning on the first page? Don't just set the stage for later conflict. Jump right in with something that will affect the protagonist and so make the reader hungry to find out what the consequence will be. After all, unless something is already happening, how can we want to know what happens next?

Is there conflict in what's happening? Will the conflict have a direct impact on the protagonist's quest, even though your reader might not yet know what that quest is?

Is something at stake on the first page? And, as important, is your reader aware of what it is?

Is there a sense that "all is not as it seems"? This is especially important if the protagonist isn't introduced in the first few pages, in which case it pays to ask: Is there a growing sense of focused foreboding that'll keep the reader hooked until the protagonist appears in the not-too-distant future?

Can we glimpse enough of the "big picture" to have that all-important yardstick? It's the "big picture" that gives readers perspective and conveys the point of each scene, enabling them to add things up. If we don't know where the story is going, how can we tell if it's moving at all?

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HOW TO ZERO IN
ON YOUR POINT

COGNITIVE SECRET:

When the brain focuses its full attention on something, it filters out all unnecessary information.

STORY SECRET:

To hold the brain's attention, everything in a story must be there on a need-to-know basis.



Stick to the point.

—W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

HERE'S A DISCONCERTING THOUGHT: marketers, politicians, and evangelists know more about story than most writers. This is because, by definition, they start with something writers often never even think about—the point their story will make. Armed with that knowledge, they then craft a tale in which every word, every image, every nuance leads directly to it.

Look around your house. Chances are you bought just about everything you see (even Fido) because while you weren't looking, a clever story snuck in and persuaded you to. It's not that you're easy to boss around, but a well-crafted story speaks first to your cognitive unconscious¹—which marketers hope will then translate it into something conscious, like, *It may be midnight, but I really do deserve a Big Mac. Gee, she looks so happy; I wonder if I can get my doctor to prescribe that pill. It'd sure be fun to have a beer with that guy, I think I'll vote for him.*

Scary, huh?

So to take back some of that power, writers would do well to embrace this counterintuitive fact: the defining element of a story is something that has little to do with writing. Rather, it underlies the story itself and is what renowned linguist William Labov has dubbed “evaluation” because it allows readers to evaluate the meaning of the story's events. Think of it as the “So what?” factor.² It's what lets readers in on the point of the story, cluing them in to the relevance of everything that happens in it. Put plainly, it tells them what the story is about. As literary scholar Brian Boyd so aptly points out, a story

with no point of reference leaves the reader with no way of determining what information matters: is it “the color of people's eyes or their socks? The shape of their noses or their shoes? The number of syllables in their name?”³

Thus your first job is to zero in on the point your story is making. The good news is that this is one of the few things that can actually cut down on time spent rewriting. Why? Because from the get-go it allows you to do for your story what your cognitive unconscious automatically does for you: filter out unnecessary and distracting information.⁴

To that end, in this chapter we'll explore how weaving together the protagonist's issue, the theme, and the plot keeps a story focused; what theme really means and how it defines your story; and the ways in which plot can get in your way. Then we'll put these principles through a test run, focusing on that literary classic, *Gone with the Wind*.

A Story Versus Stuff That Happens

A story is designed, from beginning to end, to answer a single overarching question. As readers we instinctively know this, so we expect every word, every line, every character, every image, every action to move us closer to the answer. Will Romeo and Juliet run off together? Will Scarlett realize Rhett's the man for her before it's too late? Will we find out enough about Charles Foster Kane to know what the hell Rosebud means?

Thus it would seem that when you're writing a story, defining what it's about should be simple—obvious, almost—yet it often proves to be maddeningly elusive. Despite our best intention, the narrative meanders, spending way too much time wandering aimlessly down back roads. So in the end, although a lot of interesting events take place, they don't add up to anything. No question is asked, let alone answered. The story is so full of things the reader doesn't need to know that it has no focus, so it isn't really a story. It's just a collection of things that happen.

Stories that lack focus often aren't about anything at all. Sounds impossible, doesn't it? But I can't tell you how many manuscripts I've read where if someone asked, "What's it about?" my only answer would be, "It's about three hundred pages." As one editor put it, "If you can't summarize your book in a few sentences, rewrite the book until you can."

I agree. Years of reading query letters, synopses, and countless manuscripts and screenplays have taught me that writers who can't sum up the story they're telling in a clearly focused, intriguing sentence or two probably haven't written a clearly focused, intriguing story. It wasn't a lesson that came easy. I'd read a summary that seemed promising but was jumbled and a little disjointed and think, *Hey, the ability to write a good story is very different from the ability to write a good summary*. So I'd start reading the manuscript. I rarely got far, however, because it usually turned out that the summary did present an accurate picture of the story, which was itself disjointed and jumbled.

Here are just a few telltale signs that a story is going off the rails:

- We have no idea who the protagonist is, so we have no way to gauge the relevance or meaning of anything that happens.
- We know who the protagonist is, but she doesn't seem to have a goal, so we don't know what the point is or where the story is going.
- We know what the protagonist's goal is, but have no clue what inner issue it forces him to deal with, so everything feels superficial and rather dull.
- We know who the protagonist is and what both her goal and her issue are, but suddenly she gets what she wants, arbitrarily changes her mind, or gets hit by a bus, and now someone else seems to be the main character.
- We're aware of the protagonist's goal, but what happens doesn't seem to affect him or whether he achieves it.

- The things that happen don't affect the protagonist in a believable way (if at all), so not only doesn't she seem like a real person, but we have no idea why she does what she does, which makes it impossible to anticipate what she'll do next.

All these problems have the same effect on the reader's brain: not only does the dopamine surge we felt when we started reading dry up, but the part of our brain always busily comparing the reward we expected with what we actually got lets us know it is not pleased. In short, we feel frustrated.⁵ This is evidence that the author hasn't zeroed in on the essence of the story she's telling, so even though it may be brimming with exquisite prose, it feels directionless and uninviting. It doesn't take a neuroscientist to tell us what happens next. We stop reading. End of story.

The Crucial Importance of Focus

What was missing in all those failed manuscripts is focus. Without it, the reader has no way to gauge the meaning of anything, and since we're wired to hunt for meaning in everything—well, you do the math. A story without focus has no yardstick.

So, what is this thing called focus? It's the synthesis of three elements that work in unison to create a story: the protagonist's issue, the theme, and the plot. The seminal element—the protagonist's issue—stems from something we mentioned in the last chapter: the story question, which translates to the protagonist's goal. But remember what we said? The story isn't about whether or not the protagonist achieves her goal per se; it's about what she has to overcome *internally* to do it. This is what drives the story forward. I call it the protagonist's issue.

The second element, the theme, is what your story says about human nature. Theme tends to be reflected in how your characters treat each other, so it defines what is possible and what isn't in the world the

story unfolds in. As we'll see, it's often what determines whether the protagonist's efforts will succeed or fail, regardless of how heroic she is.

The third element is the plot itself—the events that relentlessly force the protagonist to deal with her issue as she pursues her goal, no matter how many times she tries to make an end run around her issue along the way.

Taken together, these three elements give a story focus, telling readers what it's about and allowing them to interpret the events as they unfold and thus anticipate where it's heading. This is crucial because “minds exist to predict what will happen next.”⁶ It's their *raison d'être*—the better to keep us on this earthly plane as long as humanly possible. We love to figure things out and we don't like being confused. For writers, focus is of utmost importance as well: the first two elements (the protagonist's issue and the theme) are the lens through which we determine what the events (the plot) will be.

How do they do this? By setting the story's parameters and zeroing in on the particular aspect of the protagonist's life it will chronicle. After all, our characters live their lives 24/7 just like we do; they eat, sleep, argue with insurance companies, get annoyed when the Internet goes down, veg out in front of the TV, and spend time trying to remember whether that dentist appointment is Tuesday or Thursday. Would you put all of that in a story? Of course not. Instead, you cherry-pick events that are relevant to the story question and construct a gauntlet of challenge (read: the plot) that will force the protagonist to put his money where his mouth is. Think baptism by ever-escalating fire.

Done right, we have another mathematical proof, a concrete frame of reference against which everything that happens is measured. After all, this is exactly how our brain processes information when we're confronted with a sticky situation in real life. As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio demonstrates, this is what literature is modeled on:

Suppose you are sitting down for a cup of coffee at a restaurant to meet with your brother, who wishes to discuss your parents'

inheritance and what is to be done with your half sister, who has been acting strangely. You are very present and in the moment, as they say in Hollywood, but now you are also transported, by turns, to many other places, with many other people besides your brother, and to situations that you have not experienced yet that are the products of your informed and rich imagination. . . . You are busily all over the place and at many epochs of your life, past, and future. But you—the *me* in you—never drops out of sight. *All of these contents are inextricably tied to a singular reference. Even as you concentrate on some remote event, the connection remains. The center holds.* This is big-scope consciousness, one of the grand achievements of the human brain and one of the defining traits of humanity. . . . This is the kind of consciousness illustrated by novels, films, and music. . . .⁷ (Italics mine.)

In other words, the center—here, how the question of what to do about said inheritance affects our friend in the restaurant—is the singular reference that everything else relates to. If this *were* a story, our friend would have an internal issue he would need to work through in order to navigate this inherently thorny situation. Would he be successful? That's where the theme comes in.

But What *Is* Theme, Exactly?

There's a lot of talk about what theme is, and how it's revealed, which can result in esoteric discussions capable of parsing it down to the thematic use of margarine as a metaphor for innocence lost. Happily, theme actually boils down to something incredibly simple:

- What does the story tell us about what it means to be human?
- What does it say about how humans react to circumstances beyond their control?

Theme often reveals your take on how an element of human nature—loyalty, suspicion, grit, love—defines human behavior. But the real secret to theme is that it's not general; that is, the theme wouldn't be "love" per se—rather, it would be a very specific point you're making about love. For instance, a love story can be sweet and lyrical, revealing that people are good eggs after all; it can be hard-nosed and edgy, revealing that people are intense and quirky; it can be cynical and manipulative, revealing that people are best avoided, if possible.

Knowing the theme of your story in advance helps, because it gives you a gauge by which to measure your characters' responses to the situations they find themselves in. They'll be kind, gruff, or conniving depending on the universe you have created for them. This, then, affects how the story question is resolved, because it governs the type of resistance the protagonist will meet along the way. In a loving universe, she may discover that, with a little gumption, she'll find her true love. In an impersonal universe, she'll find no one she can really relate to, and in a cruel universe, she'll end up married to Hannibal Lecter.

What's Your Point?

Theme often reveals the point your story is making—and all stories make a point, beginning on page one. But that doesn't mean you have to hit readers over the head with it.

Think about advertising. An ad's goal is to deliver a very specific punch without letting us know exactly how it's doing it, even though when it comes to ads, we *know* what their intention is: to get us to buy the product. As corporate consultants Richard Maxwell and Robert Dickman say in their book *The Elements of Persuasion*, "For those of us whose business depends on being able to persuade others—which is all of us in business—the key to survival is being able to cut through all the clutter and make the sale. The good news is that the secret of selling is what it has always been—a good story."⁸

Knowing your story's point is what helps you cut through all the clutter.

Not that you're as calculating as an advertising executive or that your story has so literal a purpose, which is why writers often have to stop and think about what it is they're trying to say and what point their story is making. It's crucial, because the instant a reader opens your book, his cognitive unconscious is hunting for a way to make life a little easier, see things a little clearer, understand people a bit better.⁹ So why not take a second to ask yourself, *What is it I want my readers to walk away thinking about? What point does my story make? How do I want to change the way my reader sees the world?*

Don't Bury Your Story in an Empty Plot

It's not surprising that of the three elements that combine to create focus, writers often dote on only one of them—the plot. Because it's the element that, by definition, is the vehicle for the other two, it's easy to forget they're there. Trouble is, without them the plot ends up an empty vessel—things happen, but no one is really affected by them, especially the reader. This brings us to another common myth in need of shattering:

MYTH: The Plot Is What the Story Is About

REALITY: A Story Is About How the Plot Affects the Protagonist

While thus far it's been implied, it helps to say it flat out: plot is not synonymous with story. Plot *facilitates* story by forcing the protagonist to confront and deal with the issue that keeps him from achieving his goal. The way the world treats him, and how he reacts, reveals the theme. So at the end of the day, what the protagonist is forced to learn as he navigates the plot is what the story is about. It's important to always keep this in mind since the plot, when taken by itself, can

suggest that a story is about one thing when in reality, it's about something else.

A great example of this can be found in the movie *Fracture*—which, like many movies, makes a great case study for overarching story concepts. Why? Because story-wise, film is often a simpler, more straightforward medium than prose (not to mention that people are far more likely to have seen the same movies than to have read the same books). In *Fracture*, we don't meet the protagonist, Willy Beachum, for a full seventeen minutes. Until then we assume the protagonist is Ted Crawford, whom we watch mortally wound his wife in cold blood a few minutes into the film. We believe the story will be about whether or not Crawford goes to jail for it, and in fact, that is what the plot chronicles.

But it's *not* what the story is about. Instead, *Fracture* is about whether Beachum—a hotshot prosecutor who gets the case just as he's about to leave the public sector and take a cushy job in a white-shoe law firm—will end up compromising his integrity by selling out, or whether he'll fight the good fight and stay on in the prosecutor's office (*adios*, dreams of wealth and prestige). Thus the plot—Crawford and his trial—occurs solely to test Beachum's moral fiber. So although Beachum doesn't appear until almost twenty minutes into the film, everything that happens up to that moment occurs, story-wise, solely to put him to the test.

In other words, even when the protagonist doesn't appear on the first page, everything that happens before he shows up must occur with a clear eye toward how it will affect him when he finally ambles in. This is not to say readers will be aware of it until then. How could they be? After all, in *Fracture* we have no idea the story isn't about Crawford until Beachum makes his entrance. But the writers knew. So they made sure everything Crawford did would come back to test Beachum's resolve (and “test” it not in the general sense, but in a very specific, focused way). Because each of Crawford's very calculated actions was devised to challenge Beachum's view of himself, of the world, and of his place in it. As the story progresses, these actions “fracture” his otherwise cocksure,

self-absorbed persona, allowing something far more meaningful, and gritty, to emerge.

What does *Fracture* have to say about the human condition? That at the end of the day, integrity is worth far more than wealth, even if it means that you have to live out of your car for a while. Ah, but how is this message delivered? In the guise of a compelling, fast-moving plot that allows us to burrow deeply into Beachum's skin as he wrestles with what is thrown at him. Thus we have a bird's-eye view of the battle between the protagonist and the plot, which we'll be discussing in more detail a little further on.

Theme: The Keys to the Universe

Since theme is the underlying point the narrative makes about the human experience, it's also where the universal lies. The universal is a feeling, emotion, or truth that resonates with us all. For instance, “the raw power of true love” is something everyone (okay, almost everyone) can tap into, whether the story is about a saloon owner in Casablanca, a mermaid under the sea, or a knight in Arthur's court. The universal is the portal that allows us to climb into the skin of characters completely different from us and miraculously feel what they feel.

Given the primacy of the universal, it's ironic that only when embodied in the *very specific* does a universal become accessible, as we'll explore in depth in chapter 6. In the abstract, universals are so vast they're impossible to wrap your mind around. It's only when expressed through the flesh-and-blood reality of a story, that we're able to experience a universal one-on-one, and so *feel* it.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Olive Kitteridge* offers a simple, sublime example. Its theme is how we bear loss, and author Elizabeth Strout has said that she hopes her readers “feel a sense of awe at the quality of human endurance.”¹⁰ In the following passage, a mundane moment triggers a memory that is utterly gripping because it taps into

a universal that, I'd venture to say, everyone has experienced and yet rarely found the words to express:

She was glad she had never left Henry. She'd never had a friend as loyal, as kind, as her husband.

And yet, standing behind her son, waiting for the traffic light to change, she remembered how in the midst of it all there had been times when she'd felt a loneliness so deep that once, not so many years ago, having a cavity filled, the dentist's gentle turning of her chin with his soft fingers had felt to her like a tender kindness of almost excruciating depth, and she had swallowed with a groan of longing, tears springing to her eyes.¹¹

In that very specific memory—the dentist's fleeting, workaday touch—an otherwise ineffable feeling of existential loneliness is made manifest, as palpable as if it had happened to us—because, as we'll see in chapter 4, as far as our brain is concerned, it actually has.

By filtering her story through the thematic lens of loss and human endurance, Strout was able to pluck an otherwise random moment from Olive's life and use it to give us insight into how Olive sees the world, and at the same time provide a visceral glimpse of the cost of being human.

Theme and Tone: It's Not What You Say but How You Say It

If theme is one of the most powerful elements of your story, it's also one of the most invisible. You didn't "see" the theme anywhere in Strout's passage, did you? It wasn't spelled out, wasn't referenced, but it was there, all the same. It's like tone of voice, which often says more than the words themselves. In fact, sometimes tone says the exact opposite

of what the words are saying, as anyone who's ever been in a long-term relationship can attest.

Your story's tone reflects how you see your characters and helps define the world you've set them loose in. Tone is often how theme is conveyed, by cueing your readers to the emotional prism through which you want them to view your story—like a soundtrack in a movie. It's another way of sharpening your focus, highlighting what your reader really needs to know.

For instance, the tone in a romance novel lets us know that, although big things will definitely go wrong, nothing genuinely damaging will ever happen, so we can safely relax into the story, secure in the knowledge that love is not only capable of saving the day, but actually will. Whereas in a novel like *What Came Before He Shot Her*, from the first sentence, the tone implies the exact opposite, though it doesn't come right out and tell us so. Instead, tone makes us feel it, by evoking a particular mood. Tone belongs to the author; mood to the reader.

In other words, your theme begets the story's tone, which begets the mood the reader feels. Mood is what underlies the reader's sense of what is possible and what isn't in the world of your story, which brings us back to the point your story is making as reflected in its theme—*reflected* being the key word. Because as crucial as theme is, it's never stated outright; it's always implied. Movies and books that put theme first and story second tend to break the cardinal (although often grievously misunderstood, as we'll see in chapter 7) rule of writing, "Show, don't tell." It's the story's job to show us the theme, not the theme's job to tell us the story—especially since theme is a rotten storyteller and, when left to its own devices, is much more interested in telling us what to think than in simply presenting the evidence and letting us make up our own mind. Unchecked, theme is a bully, a know-it-all. And no one likes to be told what to do, which is why reverse psychology works so well. What this means is that the more passionate you are about making your point, the more you have to trust your story to convey

it. As Evelyn Waugh says, “All literature implies moral standards and criticisms, the less explicit the better.”¹²

Besides, did you ever go into a bookstore saying to yourself, *What I’d really like is a book about survival and how catastrophes bring out the gumption in some and not in others?*¹³ Or *I’m dying to curl up with a good book that traces the defects of society back to the defects of human nature?*¹⁴ Or *What I’m so in the mood for is a book that is a metaphor for Latin America?*¹⁵ I don’t think so. Which isn’t to say that you might not leave with *Gone with the Wind*, *Lord of the Flies*, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose authors, when pressed, described their themes as such.

But wait: aren’t there more themes in each of those books? Probably. In fact, a simple Internet search will turn up myriad suggested themes for each title—some of which would no doubt stun, if not infuriate, their authors. But they are mostly secondary themes. What we’re talking about is the main theme—the one you, the writer, choose, rather than the ones scholars will later foist upon you so graduate students can endlessly debate them in small, earnest seminars.

***Gone with the Wind*: A Case Study**

To better understand how to use focus to define what your book is about—thus creating a yardstick by which to filter out all unnecessary information—let’s look at the most accessible of the three books just mentioned: *Gone with the Wind*. In the past some have dismissed *Gone with the Wind* as a trite, melodramatic potboiler, nothing more than “popular fiction.” But no one can deny its power as a spellbinding page-turner. And here’s the shocker: in 1937 it won the Pulitzer Prize. It also happened to be the bestselling novel of all time until it was surpassed in 1966 by *Valley of the Dolls*—which somehow the Pulitzer committee overlooked.

First, let’s take a good look at the theme of *Gone with the Wind* according to author Margaret Mitchell in an interview with her publisher in 1936:

If it has a theme it is that of survival. What makes some people able to come through catastrophes and others, apparently just as able, strong and brave, go under? It happens in every upheaval. Some people survive; others don’t. What qualities are in those who fight their way through triumphantly that are lacking in those who go under? I only know that the survivors used to call that quality “gumption.” So I wrote about the people who had gumption and the people who didn’t.¹⁶

As Scarlett fights, schemes, manipulates, struggles, and ultimately survives against all odds, the key ingredient is *gumption*. Fair enough. But is that the novel’s main thematic focus? Does it drive Scarlett’s reaction as calamity after calamity befall her? Is it the lens through which we watch the tale unfold? The secret ingredient that holds us fast, whether we can define it or not? It is.

What keeps us reading is the knowledge that Scarlett’s headstrong will, her guts, her nerve—her gumption—is stronger than her need to conform to society’s dictates. But we quickly learn that, as potent as her untamed gumption is, it’s also capable of completely blinding her to what is in her best interest—which, as we’ll soon see, is where her internal issue lies. We know what would make her the happiest. And we realize pretty quickly that chances are it’s the last thing she’ll do. Which raises the question: *What will she do instead? Will she ever wake up and realize what she truly wants?* And that’s what keeps us reading.

But what about the other themes that run through the novel—for instance, the nature of love, the constraints of class structure, and of course, nineteenth century society’s tightly corseted gender roles? Couldn’t any one of them be the central theme? Good question. Here’s

the litmus test: *the central theme must provide a point of view precise enough to give us specific insight into the protagonist and her internal issue, yet be broad enough to take into account everything that happens* (again: the plot). Let's see what happens when I try to sum up *Gone with the Wind* with these other contenders. First, the nature of love:

Set against a backdrop of the Civil War, *Gone with the Wind* is about a Southern belle whose misguided love for the wrong man blinds her to the one person who could give her what she wants.

It's not a bad description—if the book were solely a romance, with everything else merely “setting.” But given the novel's scope, it's much too limiting.

Well, then, what about the way Scarlett disregards social norms?

Gone with the Wind is about a Southern belle who bucks the societal tide in order to survive during the Civil War.

This one isn't bad either. That is, if you go in for the general. What societal tide, exactly? Buck it, how? Without any specifics, it's hard to get a real picture of . . . much of anything. Okay, what about class structure?

Gone with the Wind is about how traditional class structure in the South gave way during the Civil War.

Sounds like nonfiction, doesn't it? And since nonfiction sells, and there are millions of Civil War buffs, this could be a bestseller—that is, until they realize it's really a steamy romance about a gutsy woman who ruthlessly bucks the societal tide. Of course, by then even the staunchest history buff might keep mum, too busy hoping against hope that Scarlett wakes the hell up and realizes that Rhett is the man for her before it's too damn late.

So, although this isn't to say that my descriptions wouldn't entice some readers, there is nothing in them that suggests a sprawling, steamy epic, and *Gone with the Wind* is nothing if not that. But when I begin with gumption—the notion Mitchell used as her defining theme—it's another story:

Gone with the Wind is about a headstrong Southern belle whose unflinching gumption causes her to spurn the only man who is her equal, as she ruthlessly bucks crumbling social norms in order to survive during the Civil War.

Aha! While my description of *Gone with the Wind* might not be there yet, we've hit on something well worth mentioning. One way to help identify a story's defining theme is to ask yourself: is it possible to filter the story's other themes through it? In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett's gumption came first, so—for better or worse—it affects everything else: her love life, her refusal to be constrained by the mores of the day, and her insatiable need to take action when she doesn't get what she wants. Take action? Ah yes, the plot.

THE PROTAGONIST'S ISSUE VERSUS THE PLOT

As we know, it's the plot that puts the protagonist through his paces, presenting increasingly difficult obstacles that must be overcome if he's to get within grabbing distance of the brass ring.

But the plot's goal isn't simply to find out whether he snags that brass ring or not; rather, it's to force him to confront the internal issue that's keeping him from it in the first place. This issue is sometimes called the protagonist's “fatal flaw,” and whether a deep-rooted fear, a stubborn misperception, or a dubious character trait, it's what he's been battling throughout and what he must finally overcome to have a clear shot at the last remaining obstacle. Ironically, once he overcomes it, he often realizes true success is vastly different from what, up to that very

second, he thought it was. This is frequently the case in romantic comedies and is usually the moment when the big lug finally realizes that the beautiful, stuck-up, rich, thin girl he's been hell-bent on winning since the opening credits isn't *nearly* as loveable as the cute, cuddly, beautiful, thin middle-class girl next door.

Not so with Scarlett.

Scarlett's fatal flaw is self-absorption, which when harnessed to her unstoppable gumption, makes her vulnerable in a way she cannot see. But we can. And so we're rooting for her not only to survive, but also to gain enough self-awareness to keep herself from throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Does she? Almost, but she's a day late and a dollar short. Which is why when the book ends, unlike Rhett, we do give a damn.

SCARLETT'S SPECIFIC GOAL—WHAT DOES SCARLETT REALLY WANT?

But wait; it still feels like something's missing in our description of the novel. Sure, fatal flaw or not, Scarlett wants to survive. But don't we all? Indeed we do, which makes survival, in and of itself, generic—one of those abstract universals. In other words, the same would be true of everyone, so it doesn't tell us a thing about Scarlett herself and adds nothing to the story. The question is: *What does survival mean to Scarlett?* Plot-wise (that is, on the corporeal plane where the action unfolds) this translates to: *What does Scarlett need in order to feel she's survived what life has thrown at her?* The answer is her family's plantation, Tara. Meaning, *land*. As her father tells her early on, "Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything. . . ." Land is what ties you to your past and makes you who you are. Without it, you are nothing. This becomes Scarlett's benchmark, the thing that she's sure will prove she's survived.

Is she right? *Is* land what ties you to your past and makes you who you are? God, let's hope not. This is why Scarlett emerges both a successful and a tragic figure. And why her blindness to what she truly

wants—caused by her fatal flaw—is understandable, rather than annoying or, worse, hair-pullingly frustrating to the reader. Readers are a surprisingly accepting lot when it comes to willfully blind protagonists, provided they understand the reason for their blindness. This is often exactly what such stories are about: why *would* a person work overtime to stay blind to something that is painfully clear to everyone else? In fact, sometimes the "aha!" moment belongs to the reader rather than the protagonist. It's the epiphany that comes of realization that not only isn't the protagonist going to change, but for the first time we grasp the full weight of what the self-imposed blindness is protecting her from.

So, getting back to Scarlett, let's add a clause to our description:

Gone with the Wind is about a headstrong southern belle whose unflinching gumption causes her to spurn the only man who is her equal, as she ruthlessly bucks crumbling social norms in order to survive during the Civil War by keeping the one thing she mistakenly believes matters most: her family estate, Tara.

Focus, anyone? How's that for a mini-outline! We've taken the theme—survival driven by gumption—harnessed it to Scarlett's issue, and then run them both through the hurdles the plot lays out for her. By synthesizing the theme, Scarlett's internal issue, and the plot, we've boiled a 1,024-page book down to its essence. In one (albeit long) sentence, we've provided enough of the big picture to give a clear idea of what the book is about.

Harnessing Focus: How to Keep Your Story on Track

While clearly this is a very handy method for defining what, exactly, your story is about once it's written, it can be even more helpful before you begin writing—or at whatever stage your story is at right now. It's

never too late or too early, and it always helps. Knowing what the focus of your story is allows you to do for your story what your cognitive unconscious does for you: filter out everything extraneous, everything that doesn't matter. You can use it to test each proposed twist, turn, and character reaction for story relevance.

This isn't to say that once you begin writing you might not change your mind about the theme, the story question, or that the story might not unfold in a completely different direction than you anticipated. But—and here's another reason why figuring these things out first makes all the difference—if it *does* change, you'll recognize it and be able to adjust the narrative accordingly. How? Because you've mapped out where the story was headed, you can now use the same map to rechart your story's course. Don't forget: when a story shifts focus halfway through, it not only means it's now heading in a different direction; it also means that everything leading up to that spot has to shift as well. Otherwise, it's like boarding a plane bound for New York City that lands in Cincinnati instead. Talk about disorienting (not to mention that you've packed all the wrong clothes). The good news is that because you already have a map—something we'll develop in more depth in chapter 5—you know just where those changes need to be.

This will please your readers immensely. Since their implicit belief is that everything in a story is there on a need-to-know basis, the last thing you want is for them to continually trip over all the unnecessary info cluttering up your otherwise splendid story.

CHAPTER 2: CHECKPOINT

Do you know what the point of your story is? What do you want people to walk away thinking about? How do you want to change how they see the world?

Do you know what your story says about human nature? Stories are our way of making sense of the world, so each and every one tells us something about what it means to be human, whether the author does it on purpose or not. What is *your* story saying?

Do the protagonist's inner issue, the theme, and the plot work together to answer the story question? How can you tell? Ask yourself: Is my theme reflected in the way the world treats my protagonist? Does each plot twist and turn force my protagonist to deal with his inner issue, the thing that's holding him back?

Do the plot and theme stick to the story question? Remember, the story question will always be in the back of your reader's mind, and it is the responsibility of each theme-laced event to keep it there.

Can you sum up what your story is about in a short paragraph? One way to begin is to ask yourself how your theme shapes your plot. Put yourself through the paces just as we did with *Gone with the Wind*. It may be painful, but it'll pay off big time in the end.

I'LL FEEL WHAT HE'S FEELING



COGNITIVE SECRET:

*Emotion determines the meaning of everything—
if we're not feeling, we're not conscious.*

STORY SECRET:

*All story is emotion based—
if we're not feeling, we're not reading.*



*Indeed, feelings don't just matter—they are
what mattering means.*

—DANIEL GILBERT, *Stumbling on Happiness*

MOST OF US WERE BROUGHT UP to believe that reason and emotion are polar opposites—with reason as the stalwart white hat and emotion as the sulky black hat. And let's not even discuss which gender was said to wear which hat. Reason, it was thought, sees the world as it is, while that irrational scamp, emotion, tries to undermine it. Uh-huh.

Turns out, as neuroscience writer Jonah Lehrer says, "If it weren't for our emotions, reason wouldn't exist at all."¹ Take that, Plato! This is illustrated by a sad story that, even sadder, its real-life protagonist doesn't see as sad at all. Because he can't—literally. Elliot, a patient of Antonio Damasio, had lost a small section of his prefrontal cortices during surgery for a benign brain tumor. Before his illness, Elliot held a high-level corporate job and had a happy, thriving family. By the time he saw Damasio, Elliot was in the process of losing everything. He still tested in the 97th percentile in IQ, had a high-functioning memory, and had no trouble enumerating each and every possible solution to a problem. Trouble was, he couldn't make a decision—from what color pen to use to whether it was more important to do the work his boss expected or spend the day alphabetizing all the folders in his office.²

Why? Because, as Damasio discovered, the damage to his brain left him unable to experience emotion. As a result, he was utterly detached and approached life as if everything in it was neutral. But wait, shouldn't that be a good thing? Now that emotion couldn't butt in and cloud Elliot's judgment, he'd be free to make rational decisions, right? I think you know where this is going. Without emotion, each

option carried the exact same weight—everything really was six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Turns out, as cognitive scientist Steven Pinker notes, “Emotions are mechanisms that set the brain’s highest-level goals.”³ Along with, apparently, every other goal, down to what to have for breakfast. Without emotions, Elliot had no way to gauge what was important and what wasn’t, what mattered and what didn’t.

It is exactly the same when it comes to story. If the reader can’t *feel* what matters and what doesn’t, then nothing matters, including finishing the story. The question for writers, then, is where do these feelings come from? The answer’s very simple: the protagonist.

In this chapter we’ll explore how to deftly weave in the most important, yet often overlooked, element of story—letting the reader know how your protagonist is reacting internally to everything that happens, as it happens. We’ll decode the secret of conveying thoughts when writing in first or third person; expose the sins of editorializing; take a good look at how body language never lies; and rethink that bossy old saw, “Write what you know.”

The Protagonist: You Feel Me?

When we’re fully engaged in a story, our own boundaries dissolve. We become the protagonist, feeling what she feels, wanting what she wants, fearing what she fears—as we’ll see in the next chapter, we literally mirror her every thought. It’s true of books and it’s true of movies, too. I remember in college walking home after seeing an old Katharine Hepburn movie. It didn’t occur to me how deeply I’d been affected until I caught my own reflection mirrored in a darkened store window. Until that moment, I’d been Katharine Hepburn. Or, more precisely, Linda Seton in *Holiday*. Then all of a sudden I was me again, which definitely meant that Cary Grant was not waiting for me on board a ship about to set sail into a glorious future.

But at least for a few splendid minutes walking down Shattuck Avenue, I saw the world through Linda Seton’s eyes. It was visceral, and it felt like a gift—because my worldview had shifted. Linda was the black sheep of her family, and so was I. She’d fought tradition, regardless of the consequences, and even though she spent years in the proverbial attic, in the end, she triumphed. Maybe I could too. My step was lighter walking home than when I left for the theater.

This is a gift that so many of the manuscripts I’ve since read didn’t quite bestow, because the author had fallen prey to a very common pitfall, one that in essence rendered their protagonist off-limits to the reader. They had mistaken the story for what happens in it. But as we’ve learned, the real story is how what happens affects the protagonist, and what she does as a result.

This means that *everything* in a story gets its emotional weight and meaning based on how it affects the protagonist. If it doesn’t affect her—even if we’re talking birth, death, or the fall of the Roman Empire—it is completely neutral. And guess what? Neutrality bores the reader. If it’s neutral, it’s not only beside the point, it detracts from it.

That’s why in every scene you write, the protagonist must react in a way the reader can see and understand in the moment. This reaction must be specific, personal, and have an effect on whether the protagonist achieves her goal. What it can’t be is dispassionate objective commentary.

Readers intuitively know what neuroscientists have discovered: everything we experience is automatically coated in emotion. Why? It’s our version of a computer’s ones and zeros, and it’s based on a single question: *Will it hurt me, or will it help me?*⁴ This humble equation underlies every aspect of our rich, elegant, complex, and ever-changing sense of self, and how we experience the world around us. According to Damasio, “No set of conscious images of any kind on any topic ever fails to be accompanied by an obedient choir of emotions and consequent feelings.”⁵ If we’re not feeling, we’re not breathing. A neutral protagonist is an automaton.

How to Catapult the Reader into Your Protagonist's Skin

When your protagonist's reaction is up close and personal, it catapults us into his skin, where we become "sensate," feeling what he feels, and there we remain throughout the entire story. This isn't to say we won't feel what other characters feel as well. But ultimately, what other characters do, think, and feel will *itself* be measured by its effect on the protagonist. It is the protagonist's story, after all, so we evaluate everyone and everything else based on how they affect him. Because ultimately what moves a story forward are the protagonist's actions, reactions, and decisions, rather than the external events that trigger them.

Your protagonist's reaction can come across in one of three ways:

1. **Externally:** Fred is late; Sue paces nervously, stubbing her toe. It hurts. She hops on one foot, swearing like a sailor, hoping she didn't chip the ruby red polish Fred loves so much.
2. **Via our intuition:** We know Sue's in love with Fred, so when we discover that the reason he's late is because he's with her BFF, Joan, we instantly feel Sue's upcoming pain, although at the moment she has no idea Fred even knows Joan.
3. **Via the protagonist's internal thought:** When Sue introduces Fred to Joan, she instantly senses something is going on between them. Watching them pretend to be strangers, Sue begins to plot the intricate details of their grisly demise.

When the events of the story are filtered through the protagonist's point of view—allowing us to watch as she makes sense of everything that happens to her—we are seeing it through her eyes. Thus it's not just that we *see* the things she sees—it's that we grasp what they *mean* to her. In other words, the reader must be aware of the protagonist's personal spin on everything that happens.

This is what gives narrative story its unique power. What sets prose apart from plays, movies, and life itself is that it provides direct access to the most alluring and otherwise inaccessible realm imaginable: someone else's mind. Lest the significance of this be lost, bear in mind that our brain evolved with just that goal—to see into the minds of others in order to intuit their motives, thoughts, and thus, true colors.⁶ (We'll explore this further in chapter 4.) Even so, in life the key word is *intuit*; movies have the raw power to convey thoughts visually, through action; plays, via dialogue. While all three can be incredibly compelling (especially life), ultimately, they still leave us guessing. In prose, those thoughts, clearly stated, are where the story lives and breathes, because they directly reveal how the protagonist is affected by—and how she interprets the meaning of—what happens to her.

That's what readers come for. Their unspoken hardwired question is, *If something like this happens to me, what would it feel like? How should I best react?* Your protagonist might even be showing them how not to react, which is a pretty handy answer as well.

So how do you clue the reader into the protagonist's thoughts so we're privy to how he is making sense of what befalls him? That is, how do you let us know what he is *actually* thinking, especially since it's often the opposite of what he says? This is a doubly crucial question, since very often a character's reaction to what happens is solely internal—be it an unspoken monologue, a sudden insight, a recollection, or an epiphany. How you weave it into your story depends on whether you're writing in the first person or the third person. Let's take a quick look at each.

Conveying Thoughts in the First Person

Conveying the protagonist's thoughts when writing in the first person sounds like a no-brainer. After all, since he's telling us his story, *everything* reflects what he thinks, right? Exactly. This is what makes

it tricky. Why? Because it means that every single thing in a story told in the first person must have a direct, implicit, and illuminating spin. Thus the narrator's opinion is laced into everything he tells you. Each detail he chooses to convey reflects his mindset and reveals something about him and how he sees the world. Think of it as the *Rashomon* effect: if four people witness the same event, you end up with four very different accounts of it—each one believable. Is one account true and the other three not? Nope, it's just that given each person's worldview, they processed what happened differently; each found certain aspects compelling, assigned them meaning as *each* saw it, and so drew different conclusions.

Is there an objective truth? Maybe. But considering that by definition we experience everything subjectively, how would we know? Which means that in a first-person account, everything the narrator tells us is imbued with his own subjective meaning, simply by virtue of the fact that *these* are the details he's picked to tell his story.

How is this different from the spin things have when writing in the third person? It's a difference in distance. In a third-person narrative, there are times when the *reader* evaluates the meaning of things relayed by the omniscient narrator (that's you, by the way), based on what he or she knows about the protagonist. For instance, the fact that Ted decided to surprise Ginger with a brand new plush Day-Glo orange couch is in and of itself neutral. But if we know that Ginger loved her old couch, hates orange, and don't even ask her about plush, then we'll have a pretty good idea how she'll feel when she sees it—regardless of what she says to Ted.

In a first-person account, on the other hand, nothing is ever neutral, even for a moment. This means the narrator will never tell us about anything that does not in some way affect him. He won't give us long objective passages about what the town looked like, what Edna wore to the office, how great the madeleine tasted, or how the Reagan administration ruined the country. Sure, he might tell us all these things but *only* because they have a specific effect on the story he's telling. It

might help to think of the narrator as a narcissist (but in a good way). Everything in the story relates to him or else why would he be telling us about it?

Thus the narrator's thoughts are laced through everything he chooses to report, and he draws a conclusion about everything he mentions. But he doesn't stop there. He isn't the least bit shy about directly expressing exactly what he thinks about, well, everything. Of course, he could be completely wrong about everything he says—first-person narrators are often unreliable, and part of the reader's pleasure is figuring out what's really true.

The only thing a first-person narrator can't tell us is what someone else is thinking or feeling. So if Fred is talking about his breakup with Sue, he can't say, "When I told Sue I was in love with Joan, she felt as if she'd been gut punched." But what he can say is, "When I told Sue I was in love with Joan, the color drained from her face as if she'd been gut punched." Fred can infer or guess how Sue felt, but he can't come out and say it with certainty—unless, of course, Fred is the type of character who always assumes he knows exactly how everyone else is feeling, in which case we'll know that Fred's assertion about Sue feeling gut punched is meant to tell us something about *Fred*, rather than how Sue actually felt.

But what if Fred feels nothing? Because, you see, he's in denial. So naturally he doesn't react to Sue's rapidly escalating hints that she knows all about him and Joan. Right? Sounds like a real Catch-22, doesn't it? After all, if you *know* you're in denial, the cat's sort of out of the bag. So, when writing in the first person—or the third for that matter—how on earth can you convey all the things Fred is *not* thinking?

It goes without saying that the one thing you don't want to do is have Fred think nothing. Instead, the way to convey that he's in denial is to show how he interprets all those hints Sue's giving him. In other words, how does he rationalize them? Being in denial isn't as easy as it sounds. It's not a "blank" state; rather, it takes a good bit of work. When it comes to maintaining our coveted sense of well-being, each

of us is a quintessential spin doctor.⁷ This means that Fred will work overtime to make sense of things that, to the reader, clearly have an altogether different meaning than the one he's just assigned to them.

To sum up, when writing in the first person, it helps to keep these things in mind:

- Every word the narrator says must in some way reflect his point of view.
- The narrator never mentions anything that doesn't affect him in some way.
- The narrator draws a conclusion about everything he mentions.
- The narrator is never neutral; he always has an agenda.
- The narrator can never tell us what anyone else is thinking or feeling.

Conveying Thoughts in the Third Person

One of the beauties of writing in the first person is that you never have to worry whether the reader will know whose thoughts you're trying to convey. Every thought belongs to the narrator. But writing in the third person is another story, especially because there are several variations. First, here's a quick rundown of the three most frequently used:

1. **Third-person objective:** The story is told from an objective external standpoint, so the writer never takes us into the characters' minds at all, never tells us how they feel or what they think. Instead, as with film (long rambling voiceovers notwithstanding), that information is implied solely based on how the characters behave. If you're writing in third-person

objective, you'll show us the protagonist's internal reactions through external cues: body language, clothes, where she goes, what she does, who she associates with, and of course, what she says.

2. **Third-person limited (aka third person close):** This is very much like writing in first person, in that you can tell us only what one person—almost always the protagonist—is thinking, feeling, and seeing. Thus the protagonist must be in every scene, and aware of everything that happens; the only real difference is that you're using “he” or “she” rather than “I.” And as with first person, you can't tell us definitively what anyone but the protagonist thinks or feels unless that person pipes up and actually says it out loud.

3. **Third-person omniscient:** Here, the story is told by an all-seeing, all-knowing, objective and (traditionally) trustworthy narrator (you), who has the power to go into every character's mind and tell us what they are thinking and feeling, have done, and will ever do. The trick, of course, is to keep track of all of it. And to stay behind the curtain at all times. Even a fleeting glimpse of the puppet master completely ruins the illusion that there are no strings attached.

Okay, so how do you convey thoughts when writing in either third-person omniscient or limited? You do this by using something that, as far as the reader is concerned, is akin to telepathy. Good stories do it so well that we don't even notice they're doing it. In fact, I'd venture to say you've probably read hundreds of books written in the third person that clue you into what the characters were thinking so deftly that when it comes to figuring out exactly how they did it, you're *still* wondering whether you should italicize or put quotation marks around sentences that must then be clearly tagged as thoughts. The answer is, none of the above. No italics. No quotation marks. No tags.

Once you master the art of slipping your characters' thoughts onto the page, the reader will be able to automatically differentiate a character's inner thoughts from the narrator's voice. Readers intuitively expect the protagonist to have an opinion, whereas you, as narrator, don't even exist as far as they're concerned—that is, as long as you keep your opinions to yourself. The narrative voice is almost always neutral, meaning that as omniscient narrator, you're invisible and just reporting the facts. Your characters, on the other hand, are free to express their opinion on whatever they so desire. As long as the reader knows whose head we're in—that is, who the point-of-view character is—you rarely need a preamble at all. For instance, this is from Elizabeth George's *Careless in Red*:

Alan said, "Kerra."

She ignored him. She decided on jambalaya with dirty rice and green beans, along with bread pudding. It would take hours, and that was fine with her. Chicken, sausage, prawns, green peppers, clam juice . . . The list stretched on and on. She'd make enough for a week, she decided. The practice would be good, and they could all dip into it and reheat it in the microwave whenever they chose. And *weren't* microwaves marvelous? Hadn't they simplified life? God, wouldn't it be the answer to a young girl's prayers to have an appliance like a microwave into which *people* could be deposited as well? Not to heat them up, but just to make them different to what they were. Whom would she have shoved in first? she wondered. Her mother? Her father? Santo? Alan?⁸

Brilliant, isn't it, the way George uses a mundane event like deciding to make jambalaya as the leaping off point into the heart of a decidedly different matter? Notice how she does it by giving us a ride on Kerra's train of thought as it pulls out of grounded reality and heads into metaphor, where microwaving people sounds like

a good idea. Notice, too, how we instinctively know that it's not George who is asking these questions but Kerra herself. In fact, both the "she decided" and the "she wondered" could be eliminated, and we'd still know.

Often, a character's thoughts help establish voice and tone, thus setting the mood—beginning on the very first page. Here is the second paragraph of Anita Shreve's *The Pilot's Wife*. All we know thus far is that the protagonist, Kathryn, has been awakened before dawn.

The lit room alarmed her, the wrongness of it, like an emergency room at midnight. She thought in quick succession: Mattie. Then, Jack. Then, Neighbor. Then, Car accident. But Mattie was in bed, wasn't she? Kathryn had seen her to bed, had watched her walk down the hall and through a door, the door shutting with a firmness that was just short of a slam, enough to make a statement but not provoke a reprimand. And Jack—where was Jack? She scratched the sides of her head, raking out her sleep-flattened hair. Jack was—where? She tried to remember the schedule: London. Due home around lunchtime. She was certain. Or did she have it wrong and had he forgotten his keys again?

Notice how every fact in that attention-grabbing paragraph has meaning that compounds in light of each new detail. In other words, it adds up. What emerges is a candid portrait of Kathryn, her family life, and how she processes information as she struggles to quell the growing suspicion that something is very wrong. It's not just her thoughts, which are very simple, but her thought pattern—staccato, ragged, confused—that drives the scene forward. The minimal tags Shreve gives us—"She thought in quick succession," "She tried to remember the schedule"—serve to highlight the thoughts themselves, establishing a style, and a voice, that is fresh, compelling, and hard to resist.

But is a tag really necessary? Do we need the author to tell us that we've slipped out of the narrative voice and into the character's head? Nope. In this snippet from Elmore Leonard's *Freaky Deaky*, there is no tag or signifier at all:

Robin watched him drink his wine and refill the glass. Poor little guy, he needed a mommy. She reached out and touched his arm. "Mark?" Felt his muscle tighten and took that as a good sign.¹⁰

Is there any doubt that it's Robin, rather than Leonard, who sees Mark as a poor little guy in need of a mommy? Yet there are no quotation marks, no italics, no "she thought," "wondered," "realized," or "mused." There is nothing at all in the text that flags this as Robin's opinion. Why? Because none is needed. We get it. Just as we understand that it's Robin's *opinion* that Mark's muscle tightening is a good sign. As far as Leonard is concerned, she could be totally wrong—which is one of the things that keeps us reading. We want to find out.

Notice that, as when writing in first person, a character in third person can't make a definitive statement about how anyone else feels or what they're about to do. Just as in life, characters can only assume. And very often that assumption then tells us something about the character making it, as evinced by Selevan and his self-possessed goth granddaughter, Tammy, again from *Careless in Red*:

She nodded thoughtfully, and he could tell from the expression on her face that she was about to twist his words and use them against him as she seemed only too expert at doing.¹¹

George is not telling us that Tammy is going to twist Selevan's words. Rather, it's *Selevan* who is drawing that inference from her expression. From this we learn three things: that he's positive it will happen; that it might not; and, most revealing of all, that he feels she misunderstands just about everything he says. So since *Careless in Red*

is written in third-person omniscient, if George wanted to make it clear that Tammy has, in fact, not misunderstood Selevan, could she reveal it in the next sentence by taking us into Tammy's head?

No, she couldn't, because that would be committing the sin known as "head hopping."

Head Hopping

No matter whose point of view you're writing in, you may be in only one head per scene. Thus, since George began the scene in Selevan's head, there she must stay. Why? Because switching POV in the middle of a scene is often so jarring it instantly breaks the flow. It looks something like this:

Ann paced, wondering when Jeff would snap out of it and tell her what happened. Had he finally told his wife Michelle about them?

Why did he look so heartbroken? She wanted it to be a good thing, but try as she might, she couldn't come up with a single hopeful reason why he would sit hunched in the corner of the couch, staring at the frayed rug that, she realized, was in dire need of cleaning. When she could stand it no longer, she turned to him, "Jeff, what is it? What's wrong?"

She knows, Jeff thought. I can feel it. Sure, I told Michelle about her. Who knew she'd laugh and say, "Go ahead, run off with that loser. I bet she's the kind of woman who has a houseful of dirty rugs." I've been such a fool. But how do I tell Ann it's over? Maybe if I just sit here and stare at the rug, she'll figure it out. Women are pretty intuitive that way, aren't they?

When Jeff didn't answer, Ann's heart sank. It could mean only one thing: he'd told Michelle, and she'd mentioned that dirty rug thing again. She's been obsessed with it, ever since she opened that rug cleaning business back in March. God, Jeff is such a fool!

Disorienting, isn't it? So why do writers do it? Because they see it as the only way to convey information that is crucial to the scene. But is it? Not exactly. There is, in fact, a language that speaks louder than words. Let's have a listen, shall we?

Body Language

Imagine you're walking down the street; you turn a corner, and two blocks up you see a figure ambling away. Although from behind it could be anyone, you instantly recognize your best friend. How? By his gait.¹² Welcome to the world of body language.

Body language is the one language it's impossible to really lie in. As Steven Pinker says, "Intentions come from emotions, and emotions have evolved displays on the face and body. Unless you are a master of the Stanislavsky method, you will have trouble faking them; in fact, they probably evolved *because* they were hard to fake."¹³ In other words, body language is the first thing we humans learned to decode, because even back in the Stone Age we knew that what a person grunts and what he really means might be two very different things.

The same is true of your protagonist. In a story, the goal is to show us how a character really feels—especially when there's a big discrepancy between what he *wants* to say and what he *can* say—through his body language. The most common mistake writers make is using body language to tell us something we already know. If we know Ann is sad, why would we need a paragraph describing what she looks like when she's crying? Rather, body language should tell us something we *don't* know. At its most effective, it tells us what's really going on inside the character's head. This is why body language works best when it's at odds with what's happening—either by telling us something that the character doesn't want known

Ann pretends to be completely calm but can't stop her right foot from nervously jittering.

... or by dashing a character's expectations:

Ann expects Jeff to be glad he's finally left Michelle; instead, he sits there, hunched, staring mournfully at the embarrassingly dirty rug.

We feel Ann's pain, because the author made sure we already knew what she expected—that Jeff would return grinning, with luggage. Instead, he's come back frowning, with baggage. Unless we're aware of *both* what Ann wants and what she then gets instead, all the body language in the world will be rendered mute. This sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how often writers forget to let us know what a character *hopes* will happen, so that when it doesn't, we have no idea their expectations have been dashed.

With that in mind, let's revisit Ann and Jeff, this time using body language to convey the information:

Finally, when she could stand it no longer, Ann turned to him.

"Jeff, what is it? What's wrong? Did you tell Michelle about us or not?"

Jeff said nothing, slouching further into the sagging couch, eyes downcast as Ann paced back and forth with such force that dust flew from the mangy rug. She saw him glance at her face, his eyes quickly darting away, and quickened her stride.

Ann's heart sank; she knew Michelle must have mentioned the dirty rug thing again. Why else would he just sit there, staring at the damn carpet, the coward. He was probably waiting for her to figure it out and send him packing. Jeff's such a fool, she thought. I'm better off without him.

In this version, even though we don't hear the exact details of what Michelle said to Jeff, Ann's insights go a long way toward filling us in on their dynamic. And see how clearly we understood what Jeff was thinking simply by reading his body language? Since we know what Ann wants (Jeff), and what she's realizing she's not going to get (Jeff), her body language told us what was going on in her head as she paced. Just as Jeff's body language reveals his reaction to hers. It is purely visual. It works because, story-wise, we know what it means, emotionally, to both of them. Otherwise, the scene would be opaque. Sure, we'd know something intense is going on between them, but we'd have no idea what.

But wait. Instead of all that, couldn't you just leap in and tell the reader how they're feeling? And while you're at it, give us the heads-up on who's right and who's being a little bit of a jerk? I mean, what if the reader gets it wrong?

And that brings us to another common pitfall: editorializing. It's what writers resort to when they don't trust the reader to get it.

Hey, You're Not the Boss of Me

Make us feel, and believe me, we'll know who's right and who's probably not. *Tell* us what to feel, on the other hand, and what we'll feel is bullied. That's why when you're checking to make sure you've conveyed how the action affects the protagonist, you want to resist the urge to jump in and take it a step further, by telling the reader what to think or feel about it as well. Editorializing is perfectly fine in a newspaper (remember those?) op-ed piece, where the whole *point* is to tell readers what you believe they should think or feel. In a story, telling readers what to feel not only annoys them but pushes them right out of the story. The reader's goal is to experience the story on her own terms, not to have it explained to her or be herded toward a specific hard-and-fast conclusion. This even applies to something as seemingly benign as exclamation

points. They're almost always distracting! Really!! What's worse, they pull the reader's brain right out of the story by giving her an overt order rather than trusting the story to trigger her reaction all by itself.

So if you want us to think that John's a bad guy, show him doing bad things. It's just like in life: Imagine your coworker Vicky is telling you about her next-door neighbor, whom you've never met. "That John," she says. "He's such a jerk; he's the most self-centered, unscrupulous man I've ever met." Now, even though this may be an absolutely accurate assessment of John, because you don't know him, nor do you have any idea what Vicky's basing *her* assessment on, you have no way of knowing whether it's true. But you *have* been listening to Vicky rant on and on about how awful he is. And it sounded sort of bitter. So now you're wondering what she did to make John into such a meanie. Which, of course, is the exact opposite of her intent.

But if, instead of telling you how to feel about him, Vicky tells you that John steals from his grandmother, shoves past everyone on the train, and spits in his boss's coffee, you'll not only agree with her, but you might dislike John even more than she does.

Your job is not to judge your characters, no matter how despicable or wonderful they may be. Your job is to lay out what happens, as clearly and dispassionately as possible, show how it affects the protagonist, and then get the hell out of the way. The irony is, the less you tell us how to feel, the more likely we'll feel exactly what you want us to. We're putty in your hands as long as you let us think we're making up our own mind. That's why, as omniscient narrator, it's probably not a good idea to write this:

"I don't think I can marry you Sam," said Emily, in that condescendingly bitchy way women who think they're better than men all seem to have.

Sure, if this were a first-person narrative told by a bitter protagonist named Sam, it would be spot-on. However, if this is the author

talking, he is probably telling us a wee bit more about himself than he intends. Which—not to frighten you—is par for the course. As Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, who knew a thing or two about dancing with the devil, said: “Every author in some way portrays himself in his works, even if it be against his will.”¹⁴ Which means it might be time to reexamine that old stalwart: “Write what you know.”

MYTH: Write What You Know

REALITY: Write What You Know *Emotionally*

If your protagonist is a trumpet-playing-neurosurgeon-turned-CIA-agent stationed in Antarctica, yes, you’d better know something about each of those things. But in the larger sense, “Write what you know” doesn’t refer as much to facts as to what you know *emotionally*, which translates to your knowledge of what makes people tick.

Writing what you actually know, however, is a dangerous game given our natural propensity to tacitly assume that others have the same knowledge and beliefs that we do.¹⁵ This tendency drives what communication scholars Chip and Dan Heath have dubbed “the Curse of Knowledge.” They explain, “Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind.”¹⁶

When writers unconsciously assume the readers’ knowledge of—not to mention interest in—what the writers themselves are passionate about, their stories tend to be wildly uneven. On the one hand, the writer is so familiar with his subject that he glosses over things the reader is utterly clueless about. On the other, it’s way too easy for the writer to get caught up in the minutiae of how things “really work” and lose sight of the story itself. This is something that, for some reason, lawyers seem particularly prone to. Over the years, I’ve read myriad manuscripts in which the story comes to a screeching halt while the writer outlines the legal ramifications of every single thing,

as if the reader might sue, should some fine point of jurisprudence be overlooked.

Equally treacherous is the common misconception that just because something “really happened” it’s believable (read: makes sense). That’s why it’s always helpful to have Mark Twain’s pithy observation close at hand: “It’s no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.”¹⁷

How do you make it make sense? By tapping into what you know about human nature and how people interact, and then consistently showing us the emotional and psychological “why” behind everything that happens. Do you have to hammer this out to the *n*th degree before you start writing? Of course not. As novelist Donald Windham so astutely says, “I disagree with the advice ‘write about what you know.’ Write about what you need to know, in an effort to understand.”¹⁸

And speaking of understanding, here’s a final word to the wise: the bigger the word, the less emotion it conveys. In fact, the less it tends to convey, period, beyond the vague notion that the author is showing off. This is something that both fledgling writers and winners of the National Book Award can easily forget. To best illustrate the point, here’s said award winner Jonathan Franzen talking about a letter he received from a reader: “She began by listing thirty fancy words and phrases from my novel, words like ‘diurnality’ and ‘antipodes,’ phrases like ‘electropointillist Santa Claus faces.’ She then posed the dreadful question: ‘Who is it that you are writing for? It surely could not be the average person who just enjoys a good read.’”¹⁹

We are all that average person, and the enjoyment we get isn’t frivolous; it’s rooted in our biology. It’s what allows us to leave our real life behind and tap into how it would actually feel to experience life in someone else’s shoes. Big words? They’re pebbles in those shoes, ironically, distracting the reader from the very story they’re meant to tell.

CHAPTER 3: CHECKPOINT ✓

Does your protagonist react to everything that happens and in a way that your reader will instantly understand? Can we see the causal link between what happened and why she reacted the way she did? Are we aware of what her expectations are so we can tell whether or not they're being met? And, if she isn't in the scene in question, do we know how what happens *will* affect her?

If you're writing in the first person, is everything filtered through the narrator's point of view? Remember, in the first person, the narrator doesn't mention anything that doesn't relate to the story and that doesn't already have his personal spin stamped on it.

Have you left editorializing to the op-ed department? The more you have a message you want to convey, the more you have to trust your story to do it. The joy of reading is getting to make up your own mind about what a story's ultimate message is. The joy of writing is being stealthy enough to stack the deck so your reader will choose yours.

Do you use body language to tell us things we don't already know? Think of body language as a "tell," something that cues your reader into the fact that all is not as it seems.

4

WHAT DOES YOUR PROTAGONIST REALLY WANT?



COGNITIVE SECRET:

Everything we do is goal directed, and our biggest goal is figuring out everyone else's agenda, the better to achieve our own.

STORY SECRET:

A protagonist without a clear goal has nothing to figure out and nowhere to go.