

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Nyberg mean by “honesty” in a story? How can a story fail due to lack of honesty?
2. What fatal mistakes can writers make with setting? Character? Plot?
3. How does “theme-dominant” fiction present special problems? How might too much emphasis on presenting a clear “thesis” to the reader sabotage a story?
4. Can you imagine any reasons for breaking any of Nyberg’s rules? If so, under what circumstances and for what purposes?
5. Try stating Nyberg’s principles as positives rather than negatives, as “thou-shalts” rather than “thou-shalt-nots.” In other words, using his guidelines, try writing “Why Stories Succeed,” especially with reference to the planning stages.

Diogenes, Marvin and Clyde Nowyhn. Crafting Fiction. London: Mayfield, 2001.

JEROME STERN



Don't Do This

A Short Guide to What Not to Do

Jerome Stern (1938–1996) taught at Florida State University for thirty years, where he directed the writing program. He was the father of “microfiction,” stories of 250 words or less, which he championed in the collection Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories (1996). He also published the textbook Making Shapely Fiction (1991).

DON'T TRY TO TELL TOO MANY STORIES AT ONCE.

Some writers, full of ideas and excitement, try to do too much in a single story, have too many incidents, too many plots. They want to tell about little Ilena, lost in the supermarket, but also about her mother, who is crying because she was arrested for shoplifting, and also about the dad, who's a manic-depressive who disappears for days but then shows up with beautiful toys, and about the new neighbors next door, who scream at each other all night—and the reader is soon as confused as little Ilena.

A story that's too complicated uses up its energy just to explain what's happening. Complication is not complexity. A story that renders a single moment convincingly is a complex accomplishment. The complexity lies in the richness, the rendering, the texture, the subtlety of observation, the experience created for readers.

A beautifully complex story is often complex not because of a complicated surface but because of an impressive depth.

DON'T WRITE STORIES IN WHICH THE LAST LINES ARE:

And then I woke up.

And then the alarm rang.

Well, they're bringing my supper now, streak and french fries they promised me. I guess they'll shave my head later, when the padre comes.

He realized he was alone, and slowly blinked his third eye.

It's not a bad place to live—warm, dry, and nice padded walls.

The guillotine blade fell swiftly, severing my head from my body.

“Doris, I’m gay.”

He slowly drew the thin razor across his wrists.

He slowly shook out the whole bottle of pills in his hand.

He slowly put the muzzle of the gun against his forehead.

He slowly walked deeper into the water. He did not look back.

He pulled the sheet of paper out of the typewriter. The story was done.

What's wrong with these terrific last lines? They're all based on the same principle—surprise the reader. But who wants to read a whole story just for a punch line, especially ones that are this old?

DON'T WRITE ABOUT THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT.

Some beginnings make readers instantly suspicious.

“Mush, mush,” Nooknook shouted, as he threw bits of meat to make his dogs bound across the ice floe.

Chichen Itza was especially beautiful on coronation day, thought Uxmalki as he carved on his chacmol.

If you don't know much about huskies or Mayans, basing your fiction on them will probably lead to trouble.

DON'T WRITE A STORY WHOSE MAIN POINT IS THAT IT IS FROM SOME UNEXPECTED POINT OF VIEW.

Such stories often end this way:

I can't help it if that's all I understand. After all, I'm just a dachshund.

(Or “just a parakeet,” “just a teddy bear,” etc.)

I've seen stories from the point of view of raccoons, roaches, deer, chairs, and, once, a pet rock. Writers have, of course, written fine stories from various points of view—animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman—but that's just their starting premise. The question is what is achieved by the device. An odd point of view may seem too cute, too contrived. It can seem to be nothing but a joke on the reader: you never guessed it was all being told by an eggbeater! Or it could be too sentimental and didactic (stories told by dog hit-and-run victims, foxes in traps, and caged chickens).

DON'T WRITE STORIES THAT ARE SIMPLY IDEA-DRIVEN.

When you have an idea—"Abortions are bad," "Alcoholism destroys homes," "Old people are neglected"—and you write a story mainly to exemplify that idea, you're giving your readers an *exemplum*, a little sermon that preaches by example. In a good story, however, the experience is primary, not a message. If you think of a story you admire, and someone asks you what its point is, you're likely to answer, "Well, it's about a lot of things." In other words, you felt that the story wasn't reducible to a single idea—it probably raised more questions than it answered.

DON'T LET YOUR STORIES HAVE POPULATION EXPLOSIONS.

Readers lose track if there are too many names to retain. You must determine who is necessary to the story and remove everyone else from the set, forcibly if necessary.

Arlo swung his mallet at Arlene's ball while Uncle Claude looked on admiringly. Arlo had a nice swing for a young man. Wilson was too easily distracted, and Roger was hopeless. If anything, Roger should really be paying attention to Arlene, not standing by the wicket snickering with Frederick and Carl about Benita falling off her big sorrel, Elena.

By this time, readers are looking for their own croquet mallets.

DON'T GIVE YOUR CHARACTERS NAMES THAT ARE PHONETICALLY SIMILAR UNLESS YOU ARE DELIBERATELY TRYING TO MAKE A POINT.

Characters with names like Jack and Kirk, Winston and Kingston, tend to run together in readers' minds. Jim and Susquehanna don't. Two-syllable names with diminutive endings have the same confusing effect: Vicky and Teddy and Cindy and Danny blur phonetically.

DON'T PREFACE YOUR STORY WITH EXPLANATORY MATERIAL THAT MAKES YOUR READERS IMPATIENT FOR THE STORY TO BEGIN.

Don't be like the guy who starts telling you an anecdote:

This girl, I met her last Thursday, no it was Wednesday . . . wait, it *was* Thursday. I remember because I was getting the laundry. Well really I was coming back with the laundry, and I had to stop for gas. My car doesn't hold but ten gallons, but I usually only buy two dollars at a time anyway. So I stopped at this little self-service place because I always pump my own—I mean I'm not a mechanic but I can pump my own gas . . .

Don't paint elaborate stage sets, don't have long overtures, don't have lengthy preambles, don't do formal introductions, don't keep readers wondering What is this about? When is this thing going to begin?

Good stories intrigue readers from the first words of the first sentence.

DON'T WRITE THE FOLLOWING STORIES:

The Banging-Shutter Story

This is a story based on anticlimax. A perceived threat is built up by describing mysterious and frightening noises, sights, and sensations. The character's terror is developed by describing various fears and possibilities, and perhaps recent atrocities in the vicinity. The end reveals that it was all caused by a cat, a raccoon, a possum, a shutter, a loud clock, wind in the trees, moonlight in the mirror, a child's wind-up toy, one's own heartbeat. (Also known as the *I am der viper, I am der window viper story*.)

The Bathroom Story

In the bathroom story a character stays in a single, relatively confined space for the whole story. While in that space the character thinks, remembers, worries, plans, whatever. Before long, readers realize that the character is not going to do anything. Nothing is going to happen in terms of action. The character is not interacting with other people, but is just thinking about past interactions. Problems will not be faced but thought about. Troubles will not occur but will be remembered. That's the problem with the bathroom story: The character is never going to get out of the bathtub.

Can a good bathroom story be written? Are there good bathroom stories? Of course, especially if the claustrophobia and lack of movement are exploited for suspense and tension. Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* never gets out of prison. Samuel Beckett's character in *Malone Dies* never gets out of bed. But often the lack of motion signifies a failure of imagination. You must find a way to make up for the lack of plot, of action, and of momentum. The missing kinetic energy must be generated by particular darning, wit, or ingenuity. And even then, someone might say, "It's funny all right, but it's really just a bathroom story."

The Hobos-in-Space Story

Here a small number of characters, perhaps only two, isolated from ordinary society, talk a lot about life while not doing very much. They tend to comment about civilization, philosophize about meanings, and squabble a bit among themselves. One of them says, "It's cold." Another answers, "It's always been cold."

Perhaps this is all Samuel Beckett's fault. But it's really not fair to blame him. It is fair to blame those who don't realize that giving portentous dialogue to philosophizing outcasts (in a world gone mad) is self-indulgent, sentimental, and heavy-handed. The stylized setting makes all actions seem weightily symbolic, and the characters generally seem to stand for some major idea about the nature of man. Stories of this sort tend to end with either a bang (punching, knifeing, hitting with a plank) or a whimper (staring into embers, staring into an empty pot, staring into nothing).

The I-Can-Hardly-Wait Story

An I-can-hardly-wait sets up a character who will have his expectations dashed. A grandfather is depicted joyfully anticipating the arrival of a granddaughter. A woman is preparing an elaborate meal for the man of her dreams. A man is looking forward to his evening with the long-sought perfect woman. A child is waiting for her daddy to come home. The I-can-hardly-wait dwells on the joys expected and then deprives the central character of whatever is desired. The beloved one—man, woman, child, dog, or cat—inexplicably never shows up or is killed on the road or drunkenly calls from a bar or runs away with someone else or has really been dead for years.

It's true that life can be cruel, but this sort of story trivializes sad occurrences by focusing on the simple plot device of disappointed expectations. It's an easy way to manipulate readers, but it's too familiar a formula. Unless it brings readers to an insight beyond "Gee, you never know, do you? That was so sad," you haven't really created a story.

A variant of this is the *I-knew-the-last-line-when-I-read-the-first-line* story. That starts with the banker in a hurry knocking the bag lady into the gutter, the bully humiliating the defective child, the selfish man killing the good colle's half-breed puppies—pain is inflicted on some apparently helpless victim. Then we wait for the inevitable end. The bag lady has a secret mortgage and forecloses on the banker, the defective child ignores the screams of the bully imploring him to push the STOP button and lets the garbage compactor have its way with his tormentor, and the colle eats its owner in a lightning storm.

The I-Cried-Because-I-Had-No-Shoes-Till-I-Met-a-Man-Who-Had-No-Fee Story

This story is primarily designed to teach a lesson. Writers tell these to impart a moral, rather than to create an experience.

In these stories, characters do not have the idiosyncrasies of individuals. They have stereotyped traits—we have the unloving grandfather, the careless mother, or the ungrateful young girl. Events are set up to show the harmful consequences of

bad behavior (or the beneficial results of good behavior), and the plot seems mechanical. If the effect of the ending is that this is the moral, this is the bottom line, the work will seem only like a lesson, a sermon, a homily.

Fine stories are written about characters learning, coming to understand, and having insights, but the I-cried-because story doesn't care about rendering psychological and emotional complexity. Instead, it tries to tell readers how to behave.

The Last-Line-Should-Be-the-First-Line Story

There's a story that keeps getting told, a kind of urban legend, about a shy little guy who falls in love with a mysterious, lovely woman. They plan to get married, and the man's office friends throw a bachelor party, get him drunk, take him to a brothel, push him into a room, where he finds . . . guess who?

Now the question is, where should this story begin? It's just a long lead-up to a nasty surprise ending. It could be interesting if its ending was its beginning. How would two people behave in such a situation? Stories that lead up to revelations and odd situations really quit just where they should begin. An arrest, a compromising position, or a shocking discovery about a loved one will likely make a better opening than a closing. As an opening, there is high tension, interest, and momentum—readers want to know what happened next. As a conclusion, the revelation doesn't deal with the issue it raises.

The Weird Harold Story

Weird Harolds are stories focused on a character who is strange and different. Readers are given many examples of the character's behavior, but no insight into the character. Writers of Weird Harold stories are fascinated with a character who certainly seems worthy of fictional representation. However, they haven't figured out a shape that gives readers what they need in order to know the character from the inside, what might be driving him, what he might be searching for, what might be missing that makes him do what he does.

This does not mean you should go in for overt psychologizing, or provide a secret reason to explain complex behavior. But there has to be a sense of how the character perceives and thinks. If you can embed information in an evocative anecdote—include the story about the time the character's older brothers stuffed him into a laundry bag and left him on the sidewalk—we can begin to feel the character's emotional processes, see the world through his eyes. We may not fully understand what's going on, but we don't expect a character to be fully explained. If a character is wholly inexplicable, though, readers can only say, "That's weird," or "That's really strange." And that doesn't make a story. (Or it does—a Weird Harold.)

The Zero-to-Zero Story

If the beginning of a story presents a character who appears rigid and dull and the story simply demonstrates that the character is rigid and dull, readers and the story haven't gone anywhere. Zero-to-zero lends itself to heavy-handed ironies:

the story of the loser who tries but loses once more; the chronic cheater who, when presented with a moral choice, cheats again; the alcoholic who goes back to the bottle; the suicide who finally succeeds. These stories also tend to dwell on one characteristic, usually a weakness or a vice.

This type of story just acts out what readers learned right at the beginning. A variant teases readers with the possibility that there is more to the person than is first presented, but the story returns to zero with an ending that corroborates the beginning. Readers still haven't been taken anywhere. The longer the story, the further they haven't gone.

The Zero-to-One-Hundred Story

In this story, a character totally overcomes some character problem. But a major, permanent change in personality is difficult to make plausible in a short story.

Behavior lies deep and is rooted in habits and responses that cannot simply vanish in a wish or a phrase. The way a person has behaved or the way people have behaved toward a person affects everyone for a long time, whether they like it or not. You cannot eradicate the past merely by saying so. To write otherwise is to be simplistic.

Massive character change is a staple of commercial entertainment. Half-hour situation comedies or one-hour mystery shows rely over and over again on a formula in which various family members finally realize they love each other or have behaved badly, but now everything is all right. These endings are emotionally attractive but, deep down, we know they just aren't true.

DON'T BELIEVE ANY OF THE DON'TS ABOVE.

Art is made out of broken rules. Art pushes at the envelope of the never-done, but also constantly recycles the forever-done. Clichés are the compost of art. Transformations, inversions, reversions, and conversions continually revive fiction. If you dare, these don'ts can be your pleasure ground.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do all or most of the prohibited last lines Stern lists ("And then I woke up," "And then the alarm rang," etc.) seem to have in common? What might be wrong with ending a story with any of these lines?
2. What is "didacticism," and why does Stern feel that it's fatal to a story?
3. Much of what Stern feels should be forbidden to story writers is presented without explanation or justification, but here and there he does explain what's wrong with the things he doesn't want fiction writers to do. Collect his scattered explanations and try to create a coherent approach out of them. What, in general, does Stern feel ruins stories?
4. Have you been guilty of writing any of the stories that Stern frowns on—the Banging-Shutter Story, the Bathub Story, and so on? Looking at the story, do you feel that his criticism of that story pattern is valid?

5. Add your own items to any of Stern's lists of amusing "don'ts": bad last lines, plots not to write, etc. Be prepared to explain why, for example, the last line is indicative of an awful story or why the plot is doomed to failure.
6. Stern himself invites us to disobey any of his rules ("Don't believe any of the don'ts above"), and he also qualifies many of them with examples of writers who have done just that, including Malamud in *The Fixer* and Beckett in *Malone Dies*. Identify other successful pieces of fiction that violate any of Stern's rules, and explain how they succeed in spite of it.