

What Makes A Good Story Great? by Kaylin McFarren

While in the midst of creating a new novel, I recently found myself struggling with the purpose of my story. Was I writing it to educate readers, to entertain them, or to transport them to another place during a difficult time in our lives? Perhaps, in a strange way, I was attempting to do all three without even being aware of it--without concentrating on the basic steps required for good storytelling. And what, say you, was the final result? A longer writing and editing process that no author wants to endure.

So, what's the fastest way to create a memorable, page-turning story? Here is my simple answer. Years ago, while researching the secret to successful writing, I came to the conclusion that the key ingredient to creating great stories is constant practice. While I maintain this habit on a regular basis, I've come to the conclusion that the nature and unanticipated behavior of my characters often dictates the eventual outcome of their stories in any given situation. To further clarify, I have absolutely no control over my endings while I'm writing them. But that doesn't mean they can't be entertaining or well written.

As readers, we seem to be satisfied when stories achieve certain effects, such as moving us emotionally, inspiring us, and encouraging us to think outside the box. With the advent and explosion of self-published books, there are now virtually millions of books of all genres on the market. So, as a writer, how is it possible to make your book stand out or be different? How do you keep readers coming back time and again, searching for your latest novel or upcoming release? Well, after reviewing stacks of notes from RWA workshops and various writing conferences, I believe I've discovered some great suggestions for turning a good story into an unforgettable, compelling one.

Are you ready??

#1) Make the dramatic content of your story strong. Example: 'The neighbor's bacon and eggs breakfast' is not a story idea that is going to have readers clawing for a copy of your book. It is also highly unlikely that this subject matter would sustain an entire novel. But if the bacon is made from human flesh, the story scenario has greater dramatic potential as demonstrated by Thomas Harris' popular Hannibal novels. Once you've discovered the resulting actions and the eventual outcome that develops out of your primary story scenario, you have a real, compelling story idea.

What are the key elements of a great, dramatic story?

Conflict, Tension, Surprise, Extraordinary Characters, Flawed Behavior, Controversy, Mystery and, of course, Suspense. The list is commonly known, however, building a story with these components can be challenging when your goal is to create an intriguing, page-turning bestseller.

#2. How do I keep a reader's attention? Try varying your prose's rhythm and structure. Writing instructors often advise creative writing classes to write smart, punchier sentences. Short sentences are great for increasing pace and for helping to make scenes more exciting. Yet this could become monotonous for both the writer and reader, if a whole book is written this way. Changing the length of a sentence adds interest and can intensify drama, especially in a narrative story.

Something as simple as this can be intriguing. 'He waited all day. It was cold and growing dark by the minute.

Would anyone come?'

Exploring the rhythm of your writing consciously can help you write better sentences. Carefully crafted, creative prose makes a book better in any genre.

#3. What about characters? It's important to create believable, memorable characters that readers either love or hate. Why do we find some characters more memorable than others? Because they have something that makes them stand out. It might be a unique voice, a persona or expression, a goal or motivation, their distinctive appearance or behavior, a flaw or weakness or perhaps a hidden strength.

Authors such as Charles Dickens is famous for creating larger-than-life, memorable characters. So, what does each character in your book crave or long to accomplish? Why do they desire this and what do they have to do in order to gain it?

#4. Each part of a story needs to be effective in order to make it great. The best openings create fascinating introductions to the authors' setting, characters and plot scenarios. Often times, the middle of a story sags or lacks plot movement. But a brilliant middle, might introduce new characters who help or hinder your primary character. This is good place to add subplots that supplement your main story arc, to reveal why your characters have certain goals, to indicate what's at stake or to reveal the effect outside pressures are causing that hinders your main character's success.

#5. Most important of all, make every line of dialogue count. When characters speak, we gain a sense of their personalities, viewpoints, vulnerabilities, quirks, and attitude about any given subject. Having two or more characters sit at a table talking rarely moves the story forward unless the conversation has a purpose such as deepening or developing connections between them. In a great story, characters get to the point as quickly and realistically as possible. There are very few pleasantries and even fewer filler words because dialogue serves the plot, while holding onto the reader's attention.

#6. Who is the unseen and most influential character in a story? Believe it or not, it's the immersive setting. It's not just a house with shape and color. It's about details--about a place with personality. Is it old and dank, shutting out the light of the world, or is it light, charming and elegant? Besides giving a setting personality, it's important to make it fascinating, inviting, challenging or just plain frightening.

Also, keep in mind that old neighborhoods change with passing years. Characters might feel different about a place from their childhood. You know, lack a personal connection they thought they would have after revisiting it. If you write about a real, historical or contemporary place in particular, you need to know the landmarks, the demographics, the underprivileged areas and the rich ones. Do the required research to understand what it is celebrated or nefarious for, as readers will recognize inaccuracies and will often point them out.

#7. What is the conflict in your story? When we read the word conflict, we often think of harsh words, violence or physical fights between adversaries. But there are many kinds of conflict that can be used to improve a story. Internal conflicts create tension, leaving readers wondering if the characters they're rooting for are capable of overcoming emotional roadblocks or the hurdles in their lives. The same characters might also grapple with their environments or struggle with a natural phenomenon

#8. How do I leave my reader wanting more? The best tip of all is to deliver a knockout ending, as it leaves a lingering impression. The final lines will either entice a reader to seek out other novels you've written or result in recommendations of your work to other readers.

So, what exactly goes into a great ending? The best answer is the resolution of the primary conflict. But it's also important not to make the story's closure so tidy that it's predictable or a cop-out by ending the

story as quickly as possible or with for a happily ever after resolution when it's not needed. Sometimes, leaving a reader guessing is the best ending of all. Just make sure that any dramatic tension is held off until the end. This can be done by keeping your readers guessing or not revealing the identity of a villain until the very end. However, if you use a surprise plot twist, remember to keep the surprise believable and the last line as powerful and remarkable as the first line in your story.

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