

Story-Writing: A Few Tips

- Elements of a story:
 - Characters – Who?
 - Plot – What?
 - Setting – Where? When?
 - Theme – Why?
- One way to approach writing a story: “Character drives plot”
 - What does this mean?
 - WHO the characters are determines WHAT will happen in the story.
 - Certain types of characters get into certain types of problems (plots), and solve those problems in certain types of ways.
 - A certain character, put in a certain situation, will tend to behave in certain ways. A different character is likely to do something different.
 - Example: In *The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat*, the problem/conflict is that Witch wants Cat to help, but Cat won't help. How does this problem relate to WHO the characters are? Cat is *contrary* (meaning that he does not do what others want and expect him to do); if Cat were sweet and obedient and helpful, the problem in this book would not have happened. Also, Witch is (of course!) a witch. A witch expects her cat to be helpful (it's the job of a witch's cat to be the witch's helper!); if Witch were an ordinary person, she probably would not have this sort of expectation for her cat (ordinary people know that cats are contrary, and don't expect cats to be their helpers), and the problem would not have happened. The resolution of the story is that Witch turns Cat into a toad. How does this relate to WHO the characters are? Witch is, again, a witch, with the power (and inclination!) to turn those who displease her into toads. If Witch were an ordinary person, the resolution would have been different.
 - **What does all of this mean for YOUR story writing?**
 - When you can't think of an idea for a story, consider starting with a character. Brainstorm about the character: What does the character like? What does the character dislike? How does the character spend his or her time? How does the character treat other people? What are the character's positive personality traits (strengths or assets)? negative character traits (weaknesses or flaws)? fears? ambitions? secrets?
 - Once you have a very good idea of what your character is like, think about what sorts of problem *that particular character* might get into, or think about how your character might behave in a particular situation (for example, moving to a new school, getting picked on by bullies, or another problem you know about).
 - Start writing!

*Story-writing tips from Lynne Berry, author of Duck Skates and The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat
Lynne Berry * 7408 Dunaway Drive * Nashville, TN 37221*

- Revising your work
 - Revising is the most important part of writing! *Good writing* comes only from *rewriting*.
 - As a starting point for revising:
 - Of course check your mechanics: grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.
 - Revise your writing to “show, not tell”
 - Telling: “Sally was sad.”
 - Showing: “Sally threw herself on her bed and sobbed.”
 - Showing makes for much, much stronger writing than telling!
 - Think about painting a picture for your reader, using words. Let the reader see exactly what is happening.
 - Go through your writing and look for all forms of the verb “to be” (am, is, are; was, were). Replace these verbs with strong ACTION verbs that show what is happening, how your character is feeling, or what your character is like—rather than telling your reader this information.
 - ACTION verbs
 - Action verbs, as you might imagine, show ACTION! Let your reader see the action. Below are several examples of converting telling to showing using strong action verbs. Action verbs are underlined.
 - “Sally was scared” (telling) → “Sally trembled” (showing)
 - “Sally was bored” (telling) → “Sally yawned and slumped in her seat” (showing)
 - “Sally really wanted to see the puppy in the box” (telling) → “Sally stood on tiptoe and craned her neck to see into the box” (showing)
 - “Sally thought Joey was a jerk” (telling) → “When Joey spoke to Sally, Sally just rolled her eyes and pursed her lips” (showing)

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