

Writing at different levels: words, sentences, paragraphs, scenes
and more

Levels of Structure in Fiction

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CHAPTER ONE

Overview of *Levels of Structure in Fiction*

Introduction

This book covers the different levels of structure in fiction. Many of the different levels have “meaning” associated with them. For example, when you can summarize a novel with a sentence or two - or perhaps even a phrase, such as a title - you understand the meaning of your own novel better. If you can’t, you may have discovered a problem. The same thing can be said of a chapter, or a scene or even a paragraph.

There are some levels of structure that don’t have much meaning, or perhaps no meaning at all. For example, letters, although they are important, have very little meaning associated with them. The same may be true of a single page. Therefore, this book will not cover all possible levels.

Associated with each level of structure - at least those levels with meaning - is a host of other considerations. By gaining proficiency with these other considerations, your writing *will* improve. You will gain a set of new tools for analyzing and editing your work.

You may have seen versions of these chapters in my columns in *Fiction Fix*, a monthly e-zine associated with the website www.coffeehouseforwriters.com. However, these pieces have been enhanced with additional information and contain suggestions for exercises.

A Brief Look at the Different Levels

Writers need to be aware of their writing at many different levels. I’m not talking just about the story and the characters, but the different structural elements of their work. Writing can be examined word by word – rather like a leaf-by-leaf approach – or it can be viewed globally, for example, a book in its entirety, a level that is more like the forest.

This chapter gives a brief tour to the different levels of structure that should be considered and mastered by the writer. Each level provides different opportunities and pitfalls. I will go from the lowest level to the highest, and give a few introductory remarks on each.

Letters

You might expect that words to be the lowest level of structure, but remember that letters make up the words. After all, you have to type each letter, one at a time, and if you don’t pick the right letters you can change your meaning completely.

Typos and misunderstandings aside, letters have significance in other ways. Perhaps you are describing an alien culture. Could these people say all the words which we can say? Or should you restrict the alphabet which you are using? Or if you are naming your characters, you may want to make sure that the names begin with different letters, to make the reading easier on your audience.

Words

Words are an obvious element of structure for the writer. First of all, the writer needs to know the precise meanings of words. Recently I read a sample where someone wrote: “He rumbled his brow.” Given the rest of the writing, I don’t think this was a typo, but a misunderstanding of the language. However, what the writer should have written was: “He rumbled his brow.”

Knowing the meanings of words is the first requirement. But you should understand more about the words you use for your books. Words also have fascinating origins: embedded in them is a history of the development of the English language. We can go back to 1066 AD and the time of the Norman invasion, when French-speaking invaders conquered the Saxons, who spoke a Germanic variant. From our language today, you can tell who was inside, dining on good meats, and who was stuck laboring in the fields. For example: *pork* resembles the French word *porc*, which means pig. But what is the word for the poor fellow minding the pigs? *Swineherd*, which is very similar to the German word, *Schweinhirte*.

Some words are considered vulgar; some words may be too difficult for your readership; some may be too easy. Some words can evoke a period of time: groovy. Some you can use frequently, because they are common and the reader is not struck by them, such as the, said, and it. Others are uncommon and must be used sparingly, or their repetition will jolt the reader out of your story and back into the real world. For example, you would not want to use the word flabbergasted repeatedly, would you?

Phrases

Phrases are somewhere between words and sentences, but they still merit your attention. Phrases can illustrate how your characters think, can demonstrate metaphors which belong to your character’s way of life. For example, Augustus Caesar used to say “as quick as boiled asparagus” when he meant something would be done speedily. Phrases follow many of the same rules as words, in that you don’t want to repeat the uncommon ones too often.

Sentences

Much can be written – in fact, has been written – on the art of writing sentences. You need, of course, to have a firm command of the grammatical rules which govern sentences, so you know what is acceptable and what is not. Beyond that, the options are numerous. Long sentences slow down the reader and the story, which may be good occasionally; shorter ones speed things up. Varying your sentence structure is also good, to avoid a monotonous beat in your work.

Paragraphs

A paragraph usually contains one or more sentences. Paragraphs, I believe, are often not given enough attention by writers when they’re editing. The sentences within a paragraph need to be organized logically, supplying your readers what they need to know, in the correct order.

If you need to get a better handle on paragraphs let me refer you to Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, from section 13: "If the subject on which you are writing is of slight extent, or if you intend to treat it briefly, there may be no need to divide it into topics... Ordinarily, however, a subject requires division into topics, each of which should be dealt within a paragraph. The object of treating each topic in a paragraph by itself is, of course, to aid the reader."

Scenes

A scene usually is composed of several paragraphs, and serves to show some piece of action or reaction on the part of your story and your characters. Again, there are numerous books and articles which describe how to write scenes, including setting the scene, build-up, and the climax. Because this level is so critical to fiction, this book devotes not one, but two chapters to the topic.

Chapters

Breaking from one chapter to the next often includes a change of scene. In fact, some writers choose now to put only one scene in each chapter, which often makes for many, many very short chapters. These books don't usually end up on my list of favorites, as the writing seems too choppy, but some of them make the bestseller lists anyway, so one scene per chapter is an alternative.

What if you prefer to have more than one scene per chapter? How do you decide which scenes go into a chapter, and when the chapter should break? Scenes which contribute to a single event in your book may be grouped together for a chapter. A chapter break implies, also, a greater shift in your story than is implied by just a shift in scene.

You may have greater goals for your chapters. One goal might be to have them all be about the same in size and scope, which does help your readers relax into a rhythm. I confess to writing cliff-hangers at the end of most of mine, although I occasionally mete out mercy and conclude a chapter on a less dramatic moment.

Books

Books are organized into chapters, and when you look at the chapters of your novel, the structure of how you have told the story should be obvious to you. Are you giving enough time and space to the events which matter? Is there a pattern to the book? For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy's first proposal takes place at a point which, at least in my edition, is exactly halfway through the book's pages.

Series

Perhaps your ambitions are great, and you want to write not just one book, but several which are related to each other. Some of the same issues apply: how do they relate to each other? Should they be similar or should they be different? Do they stand alone or must they be read together?

CHAPTER FOUR

Sensible, Sensitive Sentences

So far we have looked at words and phrases. The next level of structure that contains meaning in fiction is the sentence. The goal of this chapter is to make you more aware of this level of structure and to improve your ability with it.

Sentences are critical to storytelling, because, literally, this is where and how your characters take action. With subjects and verbs – elements contained by most sentences – the tale moves along. Depending on what you write, your sentences could show setting, movement, emotion and voice – basically everything you need in your story.

In this chapter we'll consider the structure of sentences, the role their structure plays in conveying the sense and the emotion of your story, and touch on a few other ideas along the way.

What Are Sentences?

If you click on Merriam-Webster's on-line dictionary, the relevant definition that appears is this:

4 a: a word, clause, or phrase or a group of clauses or phrases forming a syntactic unit which expresses an assertion, a question, a command, a wish, an exclamation, or the performance of an action, that in writing usually begins with a capital letter and concludes with appropriate end punctuation, and that in speaking is distinguished by characteristic patterns of stress, pitch, and pauses

This may be a little too technical for you. For our purposes, sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a piece of punctuation that is either a period, or an exclamation point or a question mark. My version of Microsoft Word alerts me when I type groups of words that do not make sentences, or when I write sentences that it finds objectionable, by putting squiggly green lines below them. Usually the program informs me that these groups of words are fragments. Occasionally the program is wrong, usually because it's confusing a verb with a noun or vice versa. Most often the program is right, and I have written a sentence fragment -- but it's OK, because I meant to do this. Most often this is because my characters are either speaking or thinking, and to write more would sound unnatural.

For example, in the right context, the exclamatory sentence fragment,

“What a piece of work!”

functions perfectly well.

In other contexts, sentence fragments such as:

“Go, and do likewise.”

which is a command, may be the best choice. In this situation the subject - “You” - is considered understood.

When your software signals that what you have written is not usually considered a sentence, you should take a look at it. Bad grammar, unless intentional, should not be a part of your writing.

There is much more that could be written about the grammar of sentences, but this information is beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, having a good facility with grammar helps any writer. There are many good grammar sites on the internet.

Let’s move on to some of the goals sentences should achieve in your storytelling.

Your Sentences Should Make Sense

What should your goals be in creating sentences? The first goal is the most basic one: your sentences should make sense. You may think I am stating the obvious, of course, your sentences make sense, but this goal is not always achieved.

Secondly, you want your sentences to convey the meaning you intended. Far too often I review my work to discover that an unexpected meaning comes through. For example, I recently wrote:

The rest of the audience seemed to share her opinion, for they coughed, shifted in their chairs, and even spoke impolitely to each other.

When editing this I realized that my audience members were speaking impolitely to *each other* instead of being rude to the performer! I rewrote it as:

The rest of the audience seemed to share her opinion, for they coughed, shifted in their chairs, and spoke to each other instead of paying attention to the performance.

The original was an example of my simply writing something I did not mean to write. However, there are more complicated ways in which you can change the sense of a sentence. You need to consider the sentences and how they relate to the sentences around them. For example, if you wrote:

Molly and Janet went into the store. She dropped a package of spaghetti into her shopping basket.

Each sentence by itself is fine, but when they are placed together, they confuse the reader. Which “she” is dropping the spaghetti in the shopping basket? If it’s Janet, to convey your meaning, you could write:

Molly and Janet went into the store. Janet dropped a package of spaghetti into her shopping basket.

This is no longer confusing, but we now have the name Janet appearing twice in very close succession. Here’s another possible revision:

Molly and Janet went into the store. Grabbing a shopping basket, Janet dropped a package of spaghetti into it.

In the example above, I still could not use the pronoun “she” to represent Janet, because it would have been unclear. But I mitigated the problem of having “Janet” twice in close succession by inserting another phrase, “Grabbing a shopping basket.” Remember, you can add or remove words if you want to – these are your sentences and your words; you are free to change them if you wish.

What Is It About?

Speaking of pronouns, I want to briefly address the tendency to start sentences with indefinite pronouns, or rather pronouns being used in an indefinite manner, such as *It*, *They*, or *There*. These sentences may be vague or unnecessarily wordy. For example, consider:

It was early in the morning when the termite inspector arrived.

You could revise to make the sentence:

The termite inspector arrived early in the morning.

Let’s look at a sentence using the word *They* in an indefinite manner:

They say that the cost of drugs will go up next year.

They are always so suspiciously smart, but who are *they*, exactly? Is it Joe from down the street or someone who really knows? You could edit instead as:

The pharmaceutical company announced that the cost of drugs will go up next year.

If the pharmaceutical company is telling us that the cost of drugs will go up next year, we can have more confidence in the prediction that our colds and influenzas will be more expensive. Now, let’s look at *There*.

There was emotion in his voice that could not be disguised.

You could rewrite as:

His voice contained emotion that could not be disguised.

Of course, there are always exceptions, such as this sentence itself, or for a far, far better instance, we can turn to the beginning of Charles Dickens’ book *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

Thus, as in so many of these suggestions, they should be taken only as suggestions and not necessarily as hard-and-fast rules. The point of this section is to alert you to the possibility that sentences beginning with indefinite pronouns may benefit from revision.

Positive and Negative

You can write your sentences in either a positive or negative manner. Here's an example of the negative, using the word *not*:

He did not remember to mail his tax return.

And here we have re-written it into the positive, by getting rid of the word *not* through the use of a different verb:

He forgot to mail his tax return.

Generally, sentences written without using negatives are preferred. Still, there may be some instances in which to convey your precise meaning you may need or prefer to use a negative. That's your decision.

Active and Passive

Should you write your sentences using a passive or an active voice? Using the passive voice means writing with a form of the verb *to be*, in such a manner that what would logically be the object of the sentence has become the subject of the sentence. This is much easier to illustrate with an example than it is to explain with words, so here is an instance of a sentence in the passive voice:

The man was bitten by the dog.

Re-writing this in the active voice gives us:

The dog bit the man.

Nearly everyone agrees that the active voice is better than the passive voice. If you indulge in the passive voice too much, your writing will seem hesitant or bureaucratic. The active voice is much more forceful.

On the other hand, the passive voice has its place. Writing,

The man was bitten by the dog.

puts the emphasis on *the man*. The active version puts the emphasis on *the dog*. You could imagine that your characters were in a hospital, where the man was being treated for his bite, in which case it would sound strange to make *the dog* the subject of the sentence. In fact, in this case the characters might not even know which dog (unless there's a particularly nasty human-biting dog running around) and instead you would write:

The man was bitten by a dog.

Another reason for using the passive voice is that it allows you to shift the rhythm of your sentences. And this point helps us segue into the next section.

Rhythm

How you construct your sentences has an enormous impact on the rhythm of your overall work. Some writers become monotonous in their writing, always doing “subject-verb,” “subject-verb,” or, if the occasion calls for it, adding an object. I have encountered passages like the following:

The dogs barked. The birds whistled. The sun shone. The trees grew leaves.

Writing like this could be done for effect, that is, with an artistic purpose, rather like a strong drumbeat at the beginning of a song as you wait for the melody to make its appearance. The anticipation of the melody, or in this case, the story, makes the sentence in which something happens all the stronger by its being delayed. For example, you could continue the sentences above by adding one like the following:

The dogs barked. The birds whistled. The sun shone. The trees grew leaves.

Suzie wondered if she would die from boredom at her aunt’s cottage, or if the lack of excitement would simply drive her crazy.

Now the first four sentences serve as an ironic introduction to Suzie’s feelings, and their monotonous rhythm mirrors the dullness they describe. However, if the writer never supplies her readers with a longer, more intricate and more interesting sentence, readers will eventually be turned off, start to giggle, or become aware, either vaguely or explicitly, that something lacks in the writing. (For everything, there is an exception. Hemingway was known for his strong, stark, simple sentences, and he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. On the other hand, William Faulkner won it in 1954 and his sentences were anything but short and simple.)

Pace

The length of your sentences impacts the readers in other ways, by setting the pace of your story. Longer sentences, in which you can get lost, tend to slow down the story, inviting your readers to get comfortable and relax, like giving them a small glass of sherry and guiding them to sink into a soft sofa. Long sentences can go too far, relaxing your readers so much that they fall asleep. Shorter sentences, on the other hand, tend to speed up the pace. Longer sentences are good for delivering complicated, subtle concepts to your readers – information that can make a second reading worthwhile – but use short sentences when you absolutely must get the point across, when you are shocking your readers, when you want to make sure that they are paying attention. For example, you could write:

He didn’t die. He’s living upstairs.

Depending on the rest of the story, those sentences could be very important, delivering an important plot twist and compelling your reader to keep going.

Sentence length – and structure - can also be used to characterize your characters. Some may tend to speak in long sentences, others in short. There is a wonderful passage in Shakespeare’s Henry IV part one in which Falstaff is going on and on about his favorite subject, that is to say, himself, and why he should not be banished from Prince Hal’s company when the prince

slashes through the pompous self-praise with pair of sentences which could not be more succinct:

I do. I will.

(Not only Shakespeare needs to be credited with this example, but whoever found it to put into this website:

<http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/sentences.htm>

For more on sentences please visit it.)

The Order of Words in Your Sentences

There is more to sentence structure than the length. Consider the lead sentence from an article on cane toads:

Poisonous and ugly, Australia's cane toads are suckers for nightlife.

In this sentence, we see that the first part of the sentence sets up the context – cane toads are both poisonous and ugly – and the last phrase in the sentence, suckers for nightlife – is unexpected, and what the article is going to describe. In other words, even within a sentence, you need to be mindful of the fact that within the sentence you are going somewhere, leading your readers on a journey, and that you are responsible for making it easy for them to follow.

Sentences are often surrounded by other sentences. Therefore, the order of words within sentences will be influenced by the words in the other sentences. We'll see more of this as we look at paragraphs, but I wanted to mention it here because it's something to consider.

The order of the words also impacts the emotions experienced by the reader. If you can deliver a surprise with the very last phrase or word – whether it is a plot-twist, emotional or informational, or simply driving a point home harder – your sentence delivers a much greater punch. For example, in our novel, *Iokaste*, the very first sentence is:

“I don't want to die.”

By having *die* as the last word in the sentence, it has much more impact. Imagine, instead, that we had written:

“Die? I don't want to.”

Somehow, it doesn't have the same force. People fight for the last word, because the last word has more power.

Last Words

Each sentence should be sensible, and convey the information needed for your story. Each sentence should also be sensitive, that is, be constructed in such a way that my readers experience the emotions you promise them.

Exercises

1. Re-write the following sentences so that they make sense - note that there may be more than one correct answer and you are allowed - nay, even encouraged - to be creative.

A. The children have been bubbles blowing.

B. Thinking that home they would soon go, their last beer the two men ordered.

C. The purple panther with the paisley pajamas.

D. Screaming and dancing children in the County Fair Funhouse.

2. Change the following sentences from negative into positive. You can add some particularity - bonus points for those who come up with more than one variation!

A. She did not eat for two days.

B. Despite his exhaustion, he did not sleep for two nights.

C. She did not vote in the local election.

D. He has not been working for the last three months.

3. Passive and Active - Change the following sentences from passive to active - if you can.

A. The post was delivered by the mailman.

B. During the heat of the day, the streets were paved by the construction workers.

C. The tough math problems won't be solved by the students.

D. The diamond necklace was stolen during the night.

4. Pace and rhythm.

A. Take the following sentences and re-write them in whatever way you like in order to slow down the reader. Add words if you like – again, creativity is encouraged.

Jeff drove to the gas station. He got out of his car. He started to fill his tank. A woman with a baby approached him. She begged him to let her borrow his credit card. She needed money to fill her gas tank too.

B. Take the following sentences and re-write them in order to speed up the reader's experience (you may, again, edit in whichever way you like).

Katrina, wondering where she had put her comb, if it was in her purse as it was supposed to be or still on the bathroom counter at home, pushed the bangs out of her eyes so that she could peer in the rearview mirror. Behind her at the stoplight was a tan Impala. Normally Katrina would not recognize the make of a car - she was virtually vehicle-illiterate - but if she

remembered correctly, a boyfriend of hers from three years past had owned a tan Impala. She adjusted the mirror to get a better look, wondering if the man driving the car were Rick.

5. Emphasis within a sentence. Take a sentence from one of your own works and write it three different ways, so that the emphasis changes in each. Think about which version you like best, and why.

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