

Tricks of the Trade

Ask Annie's 12-point plan for fiction that works

by Anne Bernays



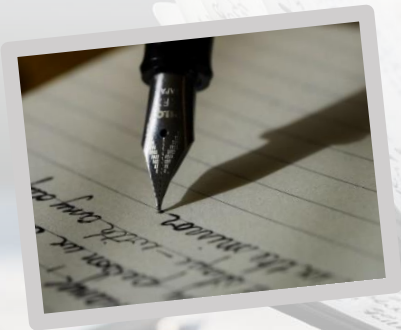
Is there a formula for crafting good stories? Consider these rules of thumb.

Elmore Leonard profitably produced more than thirty novels and several movies. Toward the end of his life he wrote "[Ten Rules of Writing](#)," a small volume I urge every writer to read.

I have taught writing since 1975 and when I started out I was both thoughtless and lucky. It has taken me all this time to be able to distill my work in order to produce a list of rules anywhere near as succinct and helpful as Leonard's. It's a slippery assignment. As Somerset Maugham, an underrated master of fiction, said, "There's one important rule for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one can remember what it is."

So here's Annie's list of a dozen tricks of the trade for the writing of short fiction.

1. Unless you're deliberately reproducing a particular dialect, the words you use in your story should be similar to those you use when speaking. Don't try anything fancy –as in "ascend" rather than "go up" or "climb." If you don't use it when you talk, don't use it when you write. As Leonard points out "If it sounds like writing, revise. " Extremely good advice.
2. Use as many "props" as it takes to characterize the people you're writing about. Props can be anything from a haircut to jewelry to an armchair or a coffee mug or even an odor. Pretend you're the set designer for a movie or play. What you place in the set is never accidental. You don't need to describe everything; just the ones that suggest to your reader what you want them to think your characters are like.
3. Never use dialog for exposition as in "Remember when the two of us went to Coney Island in a snowstorm and had to spend the night on the boardwalk and then we both came down with pneumonia?" Or "He answered the telephone: "Hello." Not only do you not need "hello" but it's a signal to the reader that you don't know how to write.
4. Adjectives and adverbs should only be used when they supply something interesting and/or unexpected to the noun or verb they're modifying. They should surprise and add tension. As in Edith Wharton's description of one of the main characters in *The Age of Innocence*: May Welland has "abysmal purity." No more need be said about poor May.



5. Since fiction is largely about what people do to each other, you can provide tension and conflict by having two characters play off each other soon after the story begins.
6. The stakes in a story must be high enough to keep your reader reading. A story about a mouse loose in the kitchen is unlikely to engage a sophisticated reader. But if a python is slithering around on the floor of the fictional kitchen you're guaranteed the reader's attention.



7. Your imagination is like a muscle: the more you exercise it the stronger it becomes. Make up stories constantly about the people on the elevator with you, the cashier at the market, the two people yelling and shoving each other on the street, the overheard conversation in Dunkin'. Everywhere, anywhere, all the time. This should slide into the category of habitual.
8. Study human nature; try to understand the complexities. Things and people are never exactly what they seem. The writer of fiction has to look behind and underneath the perpetual smile or the silent child. All of us are partly driven by unconscious urges. Remember this. Be open to any speculation. When I asked a student in my writing class, "What's the worst thing that could happen in your story?" she said, "I don't think that way." My impulse was to answer, "Then you don't belong in a fiction-writing class."
9. A reliable way to start a short story is to have something unexpected happen before page one. I also got this advice when I started writing stories: tear up the first page.
10. Make every single word work for you. Writing, after all, is about arranging and rearranging 26 characters. Out of this alphabet emerges *David Copperfield*, a hallmark greeting card, and everything in between. Words are our tools; use them with the utmost love and care.
11. The abstract is the enemy of the fiction writer. Your character didn't have a great meal; she had lamb chops followed by a lemon soufflé. The woman wasn't blandly dressed; she had on a below-the-knee woolen skirt and a grey cardigan. The idea is to particularize everything by showing it ("show don't tell") not by an abstraction or an adjective.
12. You must manage the plot of your story so that the reader won't think, "This doesn't make any sense. She doesn't explain why the husband abandoned his bride after two weeks." All the elements must fit together as smartly as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Writers of detective fiction are adept at this; they don't leave loose ends flapping around. Does it make sense that the Wicked Witch of the West melts into a puddle on the ground? Absolutely. This is because L. Frank Baum has made sure the context of his plot and the plot itself were airtight.

As I mentioned above, these so-called tricks do not touch literary theory; they're practical and easily learned. I wish I had known them when I was writing my first story almost seventy years ago.

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