

THE JOURNALIST'S PERSPECTIVE

Revamping Your Fiction Using Journalistic Techniques

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Heather Villa

A journalist knows that thoroughly investigated inquiries provide the foundation for a narrative. Alongside the answers a story emerges, complete with characters, setting, tension, and a voice that captures the mood. For an author of fiction, these elements are sometimes elusive. But they don't need to be.

When a fiction writer applies the techniques of a journalist, an engrossing and entertaining story is within reach. Consider how a journalist takes hold of a story in motion. There are places to go, people to meet, and questions to ask about circumstances likely laced with drama. Descriptive details and words become visible, available to a journalist.

When assigned to write about a neighborhood pharmacy for a business journal, I discovered a sixty-year-old story linked to a presidential campaign. I ran with it. Do you see how real life is orchestrated? There are unexpected discoveries stuck right in the middle of the ordinary. Fiction should be no different.

If you're a fiction writer, think like a journalist to reinvigorate your fiction. Here's how:

WRITE ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

Perhaps you've been told to write about what you know. While the advice is sensible, it's limiting. Award-winning screenwriter Randy LaBarge, whose experience includes journalism and fiction, concurs. "But if we only write what we know, we will quickly exhaust the number of topics each of us can write about."

Journalists often are unfamiliar with the topic when they begin an assignment. But they know how to research a topic to uncover answers. Fiction writers can take the same approach.

LaBarge suggests that writing what we don't know creates a sense of wonder that translates to the reader. A writer who sees the Grand Canyon for the first time, he says,

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versus a writer who has written about the canyon dozens of times, may write about details not previously considered.

Within a new perspective is where voice can materialize. LaBarge describes the essence of voice like this: “Simply put, I believe it’s how we tell the story. And how each of us tells a story is the result of our individual life experiences. ...”

LISTEN TO WHAT YOUR CHARACTERS SAY

You’ll find the answers to your questions when you listen to what your characters are really trying to say by finding out who they are.

Ann Streetman, adult and children’s author, describes her approach to writing fiction. “My training as a journalist helps me create a detailed backstory for the main characters and some of the minor, but nevertheless significant, ones,” she says. “I study what was going on in their hometowns and in the world during their teenage years, college years, early adulthood, and beyond, as their ages dictate.”

A firm grasp of characterization helps an author of fiction capture believable dialogue. Quotes in any journalistic piece sound real because they are real. Fictional conversations should be similarly structured.

Spend time with your characters; they will surprise you. “I have experienced the

joy of trusting my characters well enough toward the end to let them take steps that I had not anticipated,” Streetman says.

GO TO UNFAMILIAR PLACES

The steps characters take often lead us to unfamiliar places. Jessica McCann, debut historical novelist of *All Different Kinds of Free*, explains it this way: “I actually prefer to write about unfamiliar places and people. That forces me to do a lot of research to fully understand my subject. That research does more than just add authenticity to my story,” she says. “It fuels my creativity and generates ideas for characters, scenes, and events for my novel that otherwise may never have come to me. And, of course, all of that adds up to create a distinctive voice for the story.”

LaBarge points out how the unfamiliar benefits writers. “Had we not explored the hidden terrain of our topic, we may never have found the next story, may never have ignited a new passion that could lead us to places we never thought we’d ever go.”

SET ASIDE BIASES

It’s in those unfamiliar places where biases must be set aside. Journalists know to probe both sides of an issue to ensure substance.

“My writing career began with journalism,” McCann says. “When I started seriously studying and pursuing a career as a novelist,

I was surprised to learn how many parallels there are between writing fiction and non-fiction. Hemingway said it better than I can: ‘As a writer, you should not judge, you should understand.’” She also explains that when fiction writers set aside biases, readers come away with opinions all their own.

LaBarge offers related advice. “Does the story I’ve told support the facts and data as I understand them? Being able to honestly answer this question, in spite of our personal biases,” he says, “leads us to what might be called ‘The True Story,’ and this is the story that deserves to be told.”

A true story is one in which a writer can find the right voice because a revelation is the core focus.

VERIFY DETAILS TO ENSURE AUTHENTICITY

If you want your readers to believe your story, the details must be accurate. Streetman understands this. “Because I often write about characters from diverse cultural backgrounds and different religions, I do detailed research so that I can capture nuances of specific cultures and religious faiths.”

“Are the facts I’m being given verifiable?” is a question LaBarge suggests fiction writers ask from the perspective of a journalist.

Furthermore, organization of information is vital. Streetman knows to manage

her research to ensure accuracy. “Over the years, I have learned to store all my research for a specific book in digital file folders so I can access the facts to keep checking myself when I write particular passages.”

As for the presidential campaign I mentioned earlier, the pharmacist led me past the “smoking room,” where politicians once gathered, to the back of the pharmacy and showed me a faded Harry Truman campaign poster still tacked to the side of a bookshelf.

OWN THE STORY

A journalist pulls from the most concrete and eye-catching details to create an engaging hook, and so should a fiction writer. A journalist doesn’t include every researched point in a final story. Streetman makes this point clear. “I know that I will never reveal parts of the backstory in dialogue, but having all of it securely in mind informs my characterizations in subtle ways.”

After you’ve chased a story like a journalist, do what only writers of fiction get to do—bend the truth, embellish the details, and exaggerate the tension. Writer Clyde Blakely, whose work is published in several anthologies, says about fiction: “Write about nonfiction, and lie about it.” Make a story completely yours. As a result, the fictional piece will be one of substance.

Heather Villa told visual stories as a cartographer before she became a freelance writer in 2011. She writes fiction and nonfiction. Her byline has appeared in *The Writer*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *Appleseeds*, among others. She recently completed her first middle-grade novel. She lives with her husband and daughter in Oregon. To learn more about her work, visit HeatherVillaWrites.com.
