Cre8tive: 8 Great Literary Devices to Improve Your Creative Writing

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Being A Creative Writer

A writer who wants to write exceptional articles, stories, plays, and novels must know the importance and impact of each sentence, much like a golfer must know the precise position of every finger on the club, the bend of the back, the position of the head, and the rhythm of the swing. Like threads of different colors fed into a loom, sentence elements will rush into the writer's mind as a formless collection of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. The writer's task is to assort, assemble, and re-assemble to create an attractive and original story. The writer must consider every sentence a special problem; he must experiment with it, cast it and recast it in his mind or on paper, take time, consider it as a solitary unit and as a part of the whole, return to it again and again if necessary, and leave it at last only when he is thoroughly satisfied.

A writer's enjoyment -- like the enjoyment of a painter, a sculptor, a dancer, a singer, or an actor -- derives from the processes of his art from the planning, the constructing, the joining, the polishing, the exercise of skill, the conquest of problems arising with every sentence, the dexterous juggling of all the elements that go to make good writing (i.e. words, sentences, sounds, associations, ideas, arrangements, spaces, divisions, continuity, suppressions, intensifications, and all the rest). Anyone who expects to write a great deal in his life must learn about his art, including all its methods, devices, and even tricks. Then he must apply it to every word, phrase, clause, and sentence that he writes.

SUSPENSE

(An important idea hinted at in the beginning but reserved for the end makes for suspense.)

How do novelists Mary Higgins Clark, James Patterson, Stephen King, and Agatha Christie create spine-chilling suspense in their stories? They follow a simple three-step writing formula.

Suspense in writing, as in life, is created by three things:

1. *a hint,*
2. *a wait,*
3. *and a fulfillment.*

An important idea hinted at in the beginning of your article or story, but reserved for the end makes for suspense. The **hint** may either be an open statement or a vague suggestion that something important will soon happen; or it may be a situation that, in its very nature, is certain to result in an important outcome -- like a war, a serious illness, or the approach of final examinations.

Suspense catches the reader's attention, and then holds his interest by the implicit promise of an impending result of some significance. Suspense is often an unsuspected quality that makes writing vivid and nervous, instead of dull and weak.

Suspense is the opposite of surprise, and is a more effective instrument. Surprise lasts but an instant, does not hold the reader for more than a minute, and immediately becomes a memory. Suspense may last and last; it will hold the reader's intense interest, sometimes lasting hours or days (as with a good novel).

Sometimes a writer can create suspense by a series of items moving toward a climax, as in the following sentence:

"He longed for an education; he made plans to obtain one; he saved his money; he sacrificed his pleasures; he endured privations and then, at the age of twenty-four, he was killed in Iraq."

In such a sentence, suspense builds up as each clause succeeds another. Sometimes a mere periodic sentence creates suspense. A sentence like, "*The speeding automobile whirled around the corner on two wheels with a terrifying scream of rubber tires on pavement*," is much less suspenseful than this: "*On two wheels, and with a terrifying scream of rubber tires on pavement, the speeding automobile whirled around the corner.*" We might include most, or all, of these literary devices under a heading like "lengthy suspended grammatical structure."

A writer may create suspense by a definite statement that something important is about to happen later in his story, like this: "*In the story that follows, I will tell you how John Jones died, and then returned to life*." Or like this: "*After we have examined and discarded some false solutions of our problem, I will tell you what seems to me the only true and satisfactory solution*." Such advance notices make the reader know for certain

that he is waiting for something important; this literary device puts the reader in a state of suspense.

Sometimes a brief enumeration of topics the writer intends to discuss will make the reader aware that he is waiting for something important. For example, a writer might say, "*In this article I will discuss, first, the historical background of our present difficulty; next, the immediate reasons why the difficulty has suddenly grown so tremendous; and finally, the most practicable means by which we can extricate ourselves from the difficulty*." A statement like this creates an almost unconscious, but genuine, suspense in the reader. Even a bare statement such as, "*I wish to discuss three points in this article*," will keep the reader alert and forward-looking through Points One and Two. **All that is required for suspense is a hint, a wait, and a fulfillment.**

A well-matched conflict always makes for suspense. Even when the main purpose of a writer is not to attack anybody else's doctrines, but to give new information or to clarify an original idea, the writer may often profit by deliberately creating a conflict at the beginning of his exposition. He may do this by referring to mistakes that other people have made, or by outlining opinions with which he says he differs.

CLIMAX

(Details, examples, and ideas should be arranged in the order of climax.)

The order of climax is the order of steadily increasing importance. This principle applies to a series of related or parallel items that a writer uses three or more in number. The items may detail descriptions or expositions, examples and illustrations of an exposition or argument, or lists of causes, effects, and reasons. Building climax in a story demands that the writer presents the least important of these *first*, the next most important *next*, and the most important of all *last*. The writer is responsible to determine the relative importance of his various items, and arranging them according to his own standards.

Sometimes a writer must disregard the order of climax. Logic, chronology, and coherence come first. A writer should also consider euphony, as in a series like "God, home, and native land," where the reverse order would be almost a tongue-twister. Or sometimes subtle considerations of courtesy or precedence (particularly in phrases originating long ago in times when precedence was more important than today) determine the order as in, "Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Office Managers," or "men, women, and children." It is quite possible that the last word in the series, "love, honor, and obey" would not have been struck from the modern marriage ritual had it not stood out so prominently by being last! :)

PROPORTION

(Ideas should occupy space in direct proportion to their importance.)

A writer should treat unimportant ideas briefly, and treat important ideas at length. Focusing too much on unimportant ideas leads to wordiness, triviality, and tiresomeness; the slighting of important ideas leads to disappointment of the reader, apparent pointlessness, and seeming lack of discrimination on the part of the writer. A writer should develop his work with special amplitude; the writer should introduce important characters in a story with special privileges of space; and the writer should recount the important action of a narrative with special elaborateness of detail. Even when the temptation is to be brief, the writer should deliberately proceed with his amplifying. Brevity has its virtues, but also its vices.

The only time a writer can break this rule is when he wants to avail himself of the device of contrast, and so he expresses an important idea with notable terseness. "Jesus wept." The simple statement, so noticeably short, contrasts so powerfully with the magnitude of the sentiment that the verse is effective. Such effective brevity, however, can be employed only on special occasions. When a writer uses contrast too often as a rhetorical device, it looks affected. Furthermore, a writer cannot use contrast effectively unless it has the added advantages of *position*, *climax*, *isolation*, or *extraordinary dignity of occasion*.

If we want a phrase or a sentence to make an impression, we must deliberately develop it until it occupies an amount of space proportionate to its importance. There is nothing wrong with a phrase like "*bare winter trees*" but nobody would remember it. Yet everybody remembers, "*A few yellow leaves hung on the crooked branches, shaking against the cold, as the last dimmed rays of sunlight fell across the snow.*"

A writer, in describing one detail of a dying person, could have been content to write, "*Her hands and fingers moved nervously as she fell into a coma*." But a much better way is, "*A ray of sunlight fell on the bed, lighting up the hands which moved nervously, opening and shutting without ceasing. The fingers moved as if a thought animated them, as if they would signify something, indicate some idea, obey some intelligence*." The writer enlarged upon a single detail to impress the reader.

Roughly speaking, the writer should devote the number of words in a paragraph, or the number of paragraphs, to any idea proportionate to its importance. Ideas often attain importance in the reader's mind in direct proportion to the space given them. A writer will use a smaller space to express an idea of little importance, whereas the writer will use a larger space to discuss an idea of major importance.

If we combine the present principle with the principle of climax, we may express the result diagrammatically as follows:

The average composition should look like this. The least important ideas come *first*, and require the *least amount of space*; the more important ideas come *later*, and require a *greater amount of space*.

STRUCTURE

(Important ideas should be expressed in important structures; unimportant ideas should be expressed in unimportant structures.)

Importance of structure is relative.

1. A paragraph is more important than a sentence;
2. A sentence is more important than an independent clause;
3. An independent clause is more important than a dependent clause;
4. A dependent clause is more important than a phrase;
5. and a phrase is more important than a word.

A writer who expresses an idea in one of the lower structures (above) can make the idea seem more important in the reader's mind by given the idea a higher structure; and, conversely, a writer who expresses an idea in one of the higher structures can make the idea seem less important by placing it in a lower structure.

If a writer wishes to emphasize an idea, he raises its structure. Thus, instead of using a single descriptive word, as in "*a memorable day*," he could use a phrase: "*A day to be long remembered*."

Or he could elevate the phrase to the rank of a dependent clause: "*It was a day which will be long remembered*."

Or he could elevate the dependent clause to the rank of an independent clause: "*The day at length arrived, and it will be long remembered*."

Or he could elevate the independent clause to the rank of a sentence: "*The day at length arrived. It will be long remembered*."

The writer has to decide if he wishes to call special attention to any idea, and how much attention he has to make up his mind, and then act accordingly.

The next rank above a sentence is a paragraph. An idea expressed as a paragraph (in one sentence or more than one) assumes a special importance in the reader's mind.

REPETITION

(Repetition serves many purposes of emphasis, unity, clarity, coherence, and all-round effectiveness.)

The reason repetition is effective is that no reader is wide-awake, alert, and critical at every instant. For any reasons he may miss the entire significance of the writing. But if a writer repeats each important point, the reader is certain to get it at one or another of the repetitions. This, then, is the chief value of repetition: it makes the reader know the writer's principal thought, and keep it in mind.

Repetition of the elements composing sentences may involve words, ideas, or structures. We will discuss these three in that order.

1) Much repetition is for the sake of intensification. We often repeat words in speech, as when we cry, "Quick! Quick! Quick!" or "Stop! Stop! Stop!" Poetry and song are filled with repetitions of words.

In prose writing, repetition of words is seldom used for purposes of intensifying an impression. Much more common in prose is the repetition of ideas for the sake of intensification. Even more common than repeated ideas in prose are repeated structures. For some obscure psychological reason, rhythmic structures have the effect of intensifying the reader's emotions. It is for this reason that poetry, which is largely "an overflow of powerful feeling," has long been framed in repetitive structural patterns of meter and stanza.

2) Repetition may give unity to the reader's impressions by continually recalling to his mind the topic under discussion. The repetition of an idea, rather than of words, for the sake of unity is so close to repetition for the sake of intensification that distinguishing between the two is hardly possible or necessary. The repetition of structure to lend unity to many diverse ideas is a commonplace of rhetoric. It is like putting an army of many men into uniform to make them seem one organized body instead of a disorganized rabble.

3) Repetition of words may improve clarity. Sometimes clarity is a simple matter of grammatical reference. On a slightly higher plane, repetition of words sometimes indicates the connections and relationships of sentences, or helps the reader follow smoothly the progress and development of the writer's thought. Finally, word repetition may be necessary for the reader to understand what the writer is trying to say.

Repetition of ideas for the sake of clarity is often desirable, or even necessary. A large percentage of non-narrative writing consists of saying the same thing over and over again in different words. If you choose to repeat words, then the word must be important. Repetition of unimportant words sounds awkward and amateurish.

Outright word-for-word repetition of larger elements (paragraphs, sections, chapters) for clarity is virtually unknown in prose. Repetition of ideas, however, is common. It involves repeated statements, in different words, of the same idea. Almost any convenient well-written book will illustrate this practice.

Repetition of structure is useful for creating both unity and clarity. Almost any textbook, as well other non-narrative books and essays or articles, consists of corresponding, or parallel, structures. Paragraphs will correspond to paragraphs by having similarly worded topic sentences, similarly arranged illustrative material, or numerical headings written down as figures or suggested by words like "first," "next," "a third," and so on. Chapters will correspond to chapters in general structures, such as in this example: "The Role of Sympathy," "The Role of Sociability," "The Role of the Sense of Justice," "The Role of Individual Reaction." It is a manifest effort to create unity and clarity by a repetition of general structure and approach in the four chapters.

We have seen that repetition of words, ideas, or structures may intensify a concept or feeling; or give unity to independent elements of composition; or clarify complex or involved ideas and elements of composition. As a rule, repeating words intensifies, unites, or clarifies minor elements of composition such as phrases, clauses, and sentences.

The repetition of ideas intensifies, unites, or clarifies larger elements such as groups of sentences, entire paragraphs, or groups of paragraphs. And the repetition of structure intensifies, unites, or clarifies all elements of composition from mere phrases up to entire books.

Poetry, with its many repetitions of metrical feet, line-lengths, rhymes, rhythms, and stanzaic forms, has been defined as patterned language. Repetition is patterned prose. One who creates patterns of language is called an artist with the tools of the writer's

profession. Indeed, it is almost possible to determine a writer's total skill by measuring his ability to use repetition, and yet to avoid monotony.

The writer who has something to say should repeat it boldly and often. Let him choose key words and play upon them; let him voice his main ideas again and again, now in the same words, now in different; let him weld together seeming incompatibles by forcing them to assume similar structures; let him at every opportunity avail himself of the many and fascinating complexities of patterned language.

CONTRAST

(*Contrasts attract attention and make permanent impressions.)*

Frederic Taber Cooper, an important critic, once wrote: "*No matter what art or craft we practice, whether it be the painting of landscapes, or building of bridges, the decoration of tea-cups or the writing of novels, we cannot hope for fine results without invoking the aid of contrast -- the dash of red to give tone and harmony to the greens and blues of nature, the touch of pathos that adds a deeper meaning to the sparkle of comedy...*"

Contrast gives accent, vividness, color to writing; it keeps writing from being monotonous and dull. Yet contrast seldom comes easily and unconsciously to any writer. It comes, for the most part, only with deliberate thought and self-conscious creation.

Contrasts may involve tricks of printing, like *italics*, CAPITALS, or very small type in the midst of ordinary type, large spaces containing

only a few words,

and so on.

Contrasts may involve mere length of sentences or of paragraphs. A short sentence in the midst of long ones, or after long ones, attracts attention to itself.

"He was told to lead his soldiers forward at any cost, to overrun the enemy positions, to occupy the wooded hill, and to prepare for the counterattack. All this he did."

This short last sentence stands out prominently because of the contrast between its shortness and the length of the preceding sentence.

Short paragraphs consisting of a single sentence, or of a few brief sentences, or even of a single fragmentary sentence, have a similar effect.

Contrasts in length constitute the simplest of contrasts.

Other devices of contrast include:

1. Rhetorical questions occurring in the midst of declarative sentences;
2. Sudden learned words in the midst of familiar diction, or sudden words of doubtful respectability in the midst of formal diction;
3. Sudden inversions of sentence elements in the midst of plain straightforward writing;
4. Words which have certain almost invariable connotations, but which may be used in a literal and absolute sense.

Many effective contrasts involve subject matter, mood, or (in fiction) personalities of characters.

A writer should examine his subject before begins writing, and ask himself wherein he can employ contrasts.

Is he writing a paper on the present federal administration? Certain contrasts inevitably present themselves social and economic conditions before and since the inauguration of this administration.

Is he writing an essay on cats? The contrast between the habits and the personalities of cats, and the habits and personalities of dogs will better characterize cats than will pages of description or analysis.

Is he writing a story with a naive and gentle girl as the heroine? A contrasting character, worldly wise and hard, will bring out and intensify the character of the heroine.

Since few writers would hit upon such contrasts by instinct, the writer may make it a rule never to write without carefully examining the possibilities for contrast inherent in his subject.

INTEREST

(*By deliberately employing certain well-known devices, a writer may heighten the interest of his work.)*

Literary devices for gaining interest do not always come easily and naturally to the writer. While he is planning his work, while he is writing it, and even after he has written it, he must deliberately explore means of making it more readable. Of course, one of the best guarantees of interesting work is an interesting personality. No textbook on creative writing can tell the student how to be an interesting personality. All the textbook can do is tell the student to be his real self; that is, to find within himself the essential individual who has been muffled under layer after layer of conventional verbiage, conventional ways of looking at life, conventional reactions to life, conventional patterns of education-- and to be daring enough to introduce this essential individual into his writing. Even so, interesting personalities sometimes write dully. They must work hard and scheme intelligently to make their work interesting.

Periodic sentences or sentences having suspense are often more readable, more nervous, than loose or rambling sentences. Fairly short sentences (averaging about 20 words in length) , if not more interesting, are at least more readable than very long sentences (averaging over 30 words). The devices of contrast in sentence elements create interesting style. Parallel structure, if it is not overdone, is always attractive. To emphasize by repetition (as well as to anticipate the next paragraph) the present writer invites the reader's attention to the following quotations: "Variety is the spice of life"; "Variety is the soul of pleasure"; "The great source of pleasure is variety" ; "Variety is

the source of joy below"; "Variety: that is my motto"; "The one rule is to be infinitely various." Nothing makes for dull writing quite so much as monotony, and nothing makes for lively writing quite so much as variety.

One other device for creating interest is quotation. When writers are young, mistrusting their own judgment, they quote at length and with frequency; when, they are a older, they are afraid of appearing unoriginal that they hesitate to quote anything. Both extremes are deplorable. Too much quotation sounds timid and immature, or pedantic; but no quotation at all may leave a composition with little variety.

Most readers tire of the same style extended through page after page. No matter how various and rich a style it may be, it is bound to possess a certain inescapable sameness of tone which will weary the reader. Quotations inserted occasionally relieve this sameness and postpone the inevitable weariness. Sometimes quotations may come spontaneously to the writer while he is composing; but usually they come only after deliberate and laborious search when the act of composing is over. Accordingly, when he has made the first draft of writing, a writer might make a practice of running through published literature on similar subjects to find passages that express some of his own ideas, and then insert these passages into his own work or substitute them for his own words.

A writer should not use quotations ostentatiously. In general, quotations should be short; that is, a writer should use quotes no more than a couple of sentences in length, and the writer may incorporate quotes in clauses or phrases.

A primary way to interest readers is to use perennially interesting subjects like sex, religion, murders, executions, disasters, evidences of rationality in animals, relics of past ages, cures for common diseases, methods of making money, morbid aspects of human nature, and similar subjects.

Another obvious means of giving interest is setting up an opposing idea to overthrow. **Readers like a contest**. That is, they had rather see something disproved than proved; something attacked rather than something created. A writer may cater to these combative instincts of his readers. He can be vigorous, virile, and aggressive without being ignoble. He can prove even while he disproves; he can create even while he attacks. And he can succeed in being interesting where a more timid writer would be dull.

No writer can be interesting if he gives the impression of being exhausted at the end of his work. The solution lies in applying the principles discussed earlier: arranging ideas in the order of climax, giving scant attention to unimportant ideas, and using a wealth of details to back up generalizations.

A fifth way of giving interest is by means of humor. Intensity of passion, righteousness of cause, and intelligence of outlook all have their effect at times; but for persuasiveness and interestingness, they do not compare with humor. A writer may try to prove the soundness of an argument; but if he can create a laugh, he will not be asked to prove anything. He may try to show that what he has to say is so important that no one can afford to ignore it; but if he can create a laugh, he will have readers who will take the importance of his argument for granted.

What has just been said is particularly true in America; it need not be true in other countries. But in any country, writing which shows good taste by being urbane and tolerant, yet firm; which shows open-mindedness by being good-humored and dispassionate, yet sincere; which shows consideration for others by avoiding violence and extremes, yet remaining shrewd and witty such writing is interesting anywhere in the world.

Other devices for gaining interest are not so obvious. Some which may require special planning of structure or special methods of development are these: progression, the appeal to self-interest, analogy, and illustration.

To consider the first of these: We have all seen the speaker who, as he reads his discourse to an audience and finishes each page, slips that page back under his manuscript. The audience perceives no diminution in the manuscript's thickness; it feels that the speaker is not making any progress; and it despairs. Like an audience, the writer must make his readers feel that he is actually getting somewhere. Nobody likes to read page after page of solid prose unbroken by mechanical literary devices indicating progression paragraphs, divisions, chapters, parts, etc. Everyone likes the feeling of accomplishment that comes with the end of one paragraph and the beginning of a new one or of a division, or chapter, or part, or book. Everyone likes to feel that he is getting somewhere, not merely plowing on endlessly and pointlessly through page after page of writing.

The simplest way to make a reader feel progression is for the writer to announce at intervals, throughout the composition, just how much ground he has covered, and just how much yet remains to be explored. With such an orderly system of announcement,

the reader is certain to get a definite sense of progression, and to feel that the writer is covering ground toward the attainment of a definite end.

A sixth way to interest a reader is to show how a subject may be of real and immediate concern to him. For instance, people are ordinarily not much interested in local politics until they discover that their water bills have suddenly increased by about fifty per cent, and that the bad stretch of street in their block goes unrepaired; they are not much interested in plague epidemics until they discover a case of bird flu in the school which their children attend; and they are not much interested in subversive plots until they discover that a bomb has been found under the bus in which they commute every day. When a writer can make distinct contacts such as these between his abstract subject and his reader's self-interest, two-thirds of the work of being interesting is done.

Using An Analogy with Examples

Another source of interest is the use of analogy. An analogy is a figure of speech chiefly differing from a simile in which the writer elaborates a comparison between two things instead of one. Besides being a variation from literal, straightforward statement, an analogy may be interesting for various reasons.

(a) Using an analogy may attract the reader's interest by drawing a parallel between conditions that concern the reader and conditions that do not concern him. For instance, a reader may not have the slightest interest in the economic problems of

China; but if the writer makes the reader see those problems as analogous to our own problems in the U.S., he may become amazingly interested in the economics in China.

(b) Moreover, analogies may serve to convert the abstract into the concrete. Let us take an example: "There is no doubt that contact with the things that they do not understand is to many minds distinctly disagreeable." This abstract statement is not particularly significant or memorable. But Frank Colby, the author, converts it into a strikingly concrete analogy by adding, "A dog not only prefers a customary and unpleasant odor; he hates a good one. A perfume pricks his nose, gives a wrench to his dog nature, perhaps tends to 'undermine those moral principles' without which dog 'society cannot exist. " This concrete expression is far more interesting than the abstraction.

(c) An analogy may be interesting because it clarifies or simplifies an intricate argument or an involved description. The complex tangle of knotted theological doctrines about the Roman Catholic purgatory may be cut through at once by the simple analogy, "*Purgatory is a kind of waiting room or antechamber to heaven*."

We can present clearly the complicated map of Greece in a brief analogy: "*Greece is shaped like a three-fingered hand with a great gash almost cutting the palm in two below the thumb*." Such shortcuts engage the reader's interest, not only because they are imaginative, but also because they give the reader the triumphant feeling of having understand a difficult situation at a single stroke of a sentence.

A fourth way in which a writer can make composition interesting is by the use of concrete examples and specific illustrations. Nothing keeps a reader's interest so well as particular details of an abstract generalization.

Instead of the vague statement, "*John began to associate with bad friends*," how much more vigorous is this statement, "*John began to associate with the boys who gathered at 7-Eleven -- young bullies like Butch Lewis, Rick Mattson, and Pete Hammond*."

Instead of the generalized, "*All Americans are alike*," how much more effective is this statement: "*Americans are all alike. Their meals are alike, their homes are alike, their cars are alike, their tastes in magazines and moving pictures are alike, their sentimentalities about dogs are alike, their very habits of lovemaking are alike.*"

And instead of the vague, "*The children were noisy at the Saturday morning theater party*," how much more interesting is this statement made by a student: "*The noise did not come from the screen. It was inherent in the audience. There were shouts, exhortations, and vocal commands to the cowboy-hero that must have reached him at his home in Hollywood. There were wails, groans, screams as of voodoo victims, and the keening of fanatical cultists. There were whistles, stomps, exploding popcorn bags, cowbells, and now and again the soft 'plop' of an overwrought mother giving up and dropping gently to the floor*."

Developing a general idea by means of examples and illustrations requires:

1. observation,
2. memory of fact,
3. and imagination.

It is not surprising that the usual run of writers and speakers employ in their compositions only abstract generalizations. They have not observed life carefully enough to know it; instead they know only the laws of their personal creed. They have not been interested enough in life to remember what it is like; instead they remember only that they believe a certain thing. They have not imagined enough to create, or re-create, a vivid life in which they let their reader/listener participate; instead they give out only dry summaries of an intellectual system. A writer who wishes to avoid both weakness and dullness cannot neglect to expand on his generalizations by means of examples and illustrations. No other literary device of composition is so convincing or so vivifying. **■END■**

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