

“Make ‘em Cry and They’ll Remember You”

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*“A story is never really **about** anything. Always it concerns, instead, someone’s **reactions** to what happens: his feelings; his emotions; his impulses; his dreams; his ambitions; his clashing drives and inner conflicts. The external serves only to bring them into focus.”*

Dwight V. Swain

## **Four rules I heard at writers’ conferences but never totally understood:**

### **1. Write something with universal appeal.**

This rule means I should write about something with which *everyone* can identify. Or at least something that appeals to as many people as possible. *Nothing is more universal than emotions. Everyone* experiences the same emotions in varying degrees. Even God. (You doubt this? Read the Old Testament.) God has fiery emotions. He passed them along to us when He created us in His image.

### **2. Write what you know.**

Well, let’s see. I’m a housewife. My house has a kitchen and a back door. Universal to a majority of women, but boring. However, the panic that surges to my chest when I hear the back door open and close unexpectedly may contain the germ of a story. If joy rushes over me when I hear the same sound I have a different story. Notice: at the core of each was an emotion.

*I know emotion.*

### **3. Write what you feel passionate about.**

This is a direct “write with emotion” command, but when I’m struggling to keep my eyes open in a 2 PM writing class I don’t feel particularly passionate about anything but a nap.

However, sometimes I get so upset I just *have* to rush to the phone and vent so that I don’t explode. Or I feel so excited I *have* to share it with someone. Did you ever feel like that? That’s your passion. Write about those things. Turn them into a non-fiction exhortation. Create a character and put them in a situation similar to the one you just faced.

### **4. Show, don’t tell.**

This rule is much more complex than the others. “Showing” is the vehicle that enables you to communicate emotion. And to affect positive change in a reader, you must transfer an emotion.

*Rule: To impact your reader, there is one thing you **MUST** do. You **MUST** transfer an emotion.*

**All elements of a story—setting, plot, character and conflict—can be used to heighten emotion. Look over your story. Ask yourself the following questions to make certain you are *showing*, not *telling to increase the emotion in each part of your story*:**

- Does my story have conflict? Nothing brings emotions to the surface like conflict.

Fill in the blanks: Name of a character \_\_\_\_\_ wants \_\_\_\_\_ and can't have it because \_\_\_\_\_. If you can't fill this in, you don't have conflict. If you don't have conflict, you don't have a story.

*Rule: Conflict = story.*

*No conflict = no story, just a situation.*

- Do I present the conflict early in the story?

For a short story the conflict should be presented in the first paragraph. The first sentence is even better.

“I won't go,” Gerald said.

“Dad, you don't have a choice.”

For a short story, you don't need more than one conflict—problem.

*Rule: Introduce conflict as soon as possible. Keep it strong through the whole story.*

- Do my characters appear in a setting, or are they merely ‘talking heads’?

Early in your story (in the first sentence if possible) tell the reader where your characters are.

From his wheelchair, Gerald watched the white van wind down the long driveway and pull up in front of the bay window. Even without glasses he could read the large blue letters on the side that said, Loving Care Retirement.

“I won't go,” he said.

- Do my characters react with emotion to each stimulus?

From his wheelchair, Gerald watched the white van wind down the long driveway and pull up in front of the bay window. Even without his glasses he could read the blue letters on the side that said, Loving Care Retirement. He set the brake on his wheelchair and bunched his lips to keep them from trembling. As soon as he felt in control of his emotions, he squared his shoulders and spoke. “I won't go.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ted tip his chin up—almost imperceptibly. “Dad, you have no choice.”

The lump in Gerald's throat swelled to the size of a fist. He wanted to sit Ted on the couch and lecture him about responsibility to parents. He wanted to shout that he was still in charge. He wanted to leap out of the wheelchair and stride arrogantly from the room.

Instead, he sat silently—shoulders slumped, lips quivering.

- Do I give extra story space to emotion-packed passages?

I could have simply started the story with: “The van from the nursing home pulled up and Gerald’s son wheeled him out the door.” I gave it extra space to build the emotion—the tension.

“There are two kinds of time in this world, chronometrical and emotional.

One you measure with a watch, the other with the human heart. ...In writing, you translate tension into space...the more tension ...

your focal character experiences...

the more space you give it.” Dwight V. Swain

- ***Did I pick a Point Of View character and mention only what she can see, hear, touch, taste or feel?***

Readers feel emotion when they identify with your focal character. Stay in your character’s skin so they can feel with him / her. If your POV character can’t see it, hear it, taste it, touch it, feel it, or think it—don’t mention it.

When Tom revs the engine on his blue Mustang, don’t tell your reader what Seth is doing next door—even if it is really exciting. Since Tom can’t see Seth, mentioning that Seth just chain sawed his wife’s couch in half pulls the reader away from your story.

If it is important for your reader to know what Seth is doing, let Tom glance over and see him through the window, or let Tom hear a chainsaw and suspect Seth of ruining the couch.

Though there is an author omniscient point of view, it is best not to attempt it until you have honed your skill. It is impossible to get the same depth of feeling with an author omniscient point of view because you can’t get into the head of your focal character.

Your focal character and your point of view character do not *have* to be one and the same, but it will simplify matters for you if they are.

*Read best selling author Dean Koontz for an example of a writer who is able to stay solidly in the single point of view of his focal character through an entire novel.*

*A good story is plot wrapped around emotion.*

*In the best stories, the emotion is so strong it bubbles and churns and burns*

*as you weave your words around it.*

- ***Does my story include details to help the reader see, hear, touch, taste, and feel?***

Specific, concrete details make a story come alive.

Nancy walked into the kitchen and flipped on the light. Dirty dishes littered the counter and crowded into the sink. A dripping faucet had cleared a path through the dried spaghetti sauce down the center of a blue plate. The aroma of burning chocolate chip cookies and the buzz of a timer drifted to her from across the room. She hurried over and switched off the timer, then pulled open the oven

door. Shielding her face against the heat, she lifted out the sheet of burned cookies.

• **Does my story follow Dwight V. Swain's motivation/reaction sequence?**

Sometimes confusion results when we mix up the stimulus/response order. Although in life things can happen simultaneously, in writing one word follows another. So you have to act as though only one thing happens at a time. Keep events in the following order:

1. There is a **stimulus**. *A bomb explodes outside.* After the stimulus (never before), your character reacts. He:
2. Involuntarily **feels** something. *Panic surges through John.*
3. **Acts**. *He drops to the floor.*
4. **Speaks**. *"Get down!" he yells.*

The sequence never changes.

*Rule: Character reacts to stimulus in the following order:*

1. Feels
2. Acts
3. Speaks.

*Rewrite the following paragraph in the correct motivation /reaction order:*

*Julie slowed her car when she reached a busy intersection. A loud screech of brakes sounded behind her. Turning her head, she saw a truck heading towards her. SMASH! The truck rear-ended her car. Flying sideways, Julie let out a scream. The side of her head smacked hard against the side window. Julie heard a loud crack. Everything went black. Oh, my head! she thought.*

• **Did I include the emotions of my POV character?**

There are two easy ways to show the emotions of your character:

1. Enter into her mind in order to share her thoughts with the reader.
2. Mention your character's physical responses to stimuli.

"Beulah?" Nancy walked into the kitchen and flipped on the light. Dirty dishes littered the counter. In the sink, a dripping faucet had cleared a path down the center of a blue plate. A cold knot of fear balled up in Nancy's stomach. Beulah would never leave a dirty kitchen.

The aroma of burning chocolate chip cookies and the buzz of a timer drifted across the room. Why hadn't Beulah turned off the timer? Nancy hurried over and switched off the oven then pulled open the door. Shielding her face against the heat, she lifted out a sheet of hard, dark cookies. Beulah would never leave cookies in the oven.

Here's part of the same scene with different emotions:

"Bambi?" Nancy walked into the kitchen and flipped on the light. Dirty dishes littered the counter. In the sink, a dripping faucet had cleared a path through dried spaghetti sauce on a blue plate. Nancy pressed her lips together and shook her head, anger tightening her throat. She would not clean up one of her roommate's messes again. Not tonight. She needed sleep

*Rewrite the paragraph on the car accident. Add more specific details and the character's emotions.*

**Increase action and heighten emotion with the following:**

- **Did I use active verbs?**

Go through your manuscript and circle all forms of the verb 'to be' (was, etc.). Change as many as possible to active verbs.

Joe was running down the sidewalk.

Joe sprinted down the sidewalk.

*Rule: as often as possible, substitute active verbs for passive ones.*

- **Do I need to cut adverbs?**

Substitute actions for adverbs.

*Slowly*, she turned to go.

Change to: Amy lifted her son's limp hand and pressed the palm to her cheek. Once more, before she released him and turned to go, she bent to kiss his forehead.

- **Do I need to cut adjectives?**

Don't describe a *warm* fire or a *cold* January snow. Most fires are warm. Most snow is cold. Most adjectives are unnecessary.

However, Liz Taylor's *violet* eyes are unusual and you need the adjective to describe them.

If you tell me: She cradled a *beautiful* rose and gazed across the *lovely* valley—the adjectives add nothing and should be left out. Most roses are beautiful and most valleys are lovely.

However if: She cradled a *tattered* rose and gazed across the *smoke-filled* valley—the adjectives add to the story.

*Rule: use an adjective only when there is no other way to adequately describe a noun.*

## **Common mistakes that can impede the flow of a story and destroy the emotional momentum:**

- **Does my story use past tense verbs to show what is happening now?**

You can only **show** the present. The past is already gone. In daily speech, we use the **past tense** to express **what's happening now** (the present).

If you are talking on the phone you say: "Hey, Jodi just *walked* in!" (Past tense verb, but it is happening as you speak.)

You feel a jolt from a toaster: "That thing *shocked* me!" (Past tense verb, because by the time you get around to saying it, a split second after the event, it is already in the past.)

*Rule: Use past tense verbs to show what is happening now.*

- **Did I limit use of the word 'had'?**

As soon as you add the verb 'had' to another verb, you are no longer in the present. You have stepped back into the past. Therefore, you are no longer showing. Leave out 'had' as often as possible. "Each *had* (italics mine) makes your story jerk, because it jars your reader out of present action and throws him into past history." Dwight V. Swain

Change: Liz *had* opened the refrigerator.

To: Liz opened the refrigerator.

Change: The lettuce looked like it *had* been in the refrigerator for a week.

To: The lettuce on the bottom shelf was covered with slime.

Or better: Slime covered the lettuce on the bottom shelf.

**A word of caution:** You can't leave out every 'had'. (Note the "dripping faucet *had* cleared a path" in the section on emotions.) Omitting a *necessary* 'had' mixes up verb tenses and leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling.

*Rule: never use 'had' in your opening sentence.*

#### A PLEA FOR EMOTION-PACKED CHILDREN'S WRITING

Remember the story about the mother hen who gave her life shielding her from a barn fire? When the fire died down, the farmer kicked aside the charred of the mom and live chicks scurried out. I know a Christian children's author who criticized for using that story in one of her books. It was "too strong" for children some thought.

Though I don't recall many stories from my childhood, I remember that one—precisely because it was so "strong". So packed with emotion. But it wasn't negative.

It reinforced Jesus' own statements from the last week of his life.

Jesus referred to the hen and chicks when he stopped on the Mt. of Olives and wept over Jerusalem. I wonder, had Jesus seen a hen which had given her life in that way? Because later on that week he reinforces the idea when he says, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

Doesn't the emotion in the hen and chicks story help us understand the positive emotion of strong love Jesus wished to impart?

Our emotions come from God. Why would we want to "tone down"—dull—the emotions He gave us? Why would we flatten our children's stories into forgettable mush? Especially when television liberally smears violent, negative images and emotions in their faces every Saturday morning.

The hen and chicks story makes us cry because it elicits a positive response: We are awed by the depth of the mother's love. It makes us want to love.

In trying to protect our children from the negative parts of society, I hope we won't sweep the positive emotions out of our stories, too—no matter how strong they are.

*"Nothing in the world has greater power to enslave than fiction." John Gardner*