

Being a Writer's Reader

By Madeline Smoot, Editorial Director for Blooming Tree Press

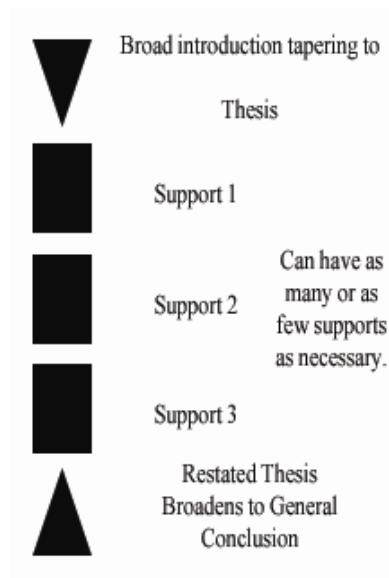
Reading someone else's work is hard. It seems easy. After all, you're just reading and maybe jotting down a few notes, right? No. There's so much you have to look for if you want to help your author friend create the best story possible. In the next few pages, I have detailed and explained the many things you should look for when reading someone else's work. These things are all necessary for a successful story. Not a single one can be forgotten or overlooked. I know that it seems like a lot, but really it's not that hard to do. I even have a handy checklist at the end to help with your first few critiques. After that, you'll be a proficient writer's reader in no time at all.

Plotting

Everything written whether it's microfiction, a short story, a novella, a novel, nonfiction essays, or even a poem has some sort of structure. They all have a beginning, middle, climax (in fiction), and an end. It's true that for many freeform poems that structure exists only in that one particular poem, but for everything else, most works fall into one of the basic formats below.

Nonfiction

Almost all nonfiction can be loosely based on the following structure. I have no idea who came up with this method of organization, but it's the process I was taught in high school to write essays for the AP exams. It's highly formulaic. Some people find that stifling, but I think you'll find that it's actually highly flexible. Also, if you go through almost any nonnarrative nonfiction book from business to science to self-help, you'll recognize this structure underlying the work's organization. I call this method the triangle-squares-triangle method. Here's a visual representation:



To use this very nonfiction essay as an example, we can see how this structure works. My broad introduction was when I talked about the ease of becoming a writer's reader. My thesis is that by using this handout, you will become a proficient writer's reader. My supports are each of my sections like plotting and character. If you flip to the end, you'll see I restate my thesis by asserting that you are now a writer's reader. I then draw some general conclusions about how being able to critique others will help your own writing.

This method is a useful way to look at nonfiction. When written in this form, information is imparted in an organized and useful manner. It's a straight line method with every paragraph building on the one before. It provides the reader with a smooth flow of ideas.

It's also highly adaptable. If you're writing a 500 word article for *Highlights* (a children's magazine) on sharks, each triangle and square would be a paragraph. In a 20,000 word mid-grade book on the same subject, the first triangle would be the first chapter, the last triangle, the last chapter, with 8 supporting square chapters in the middle. Within each chapter, you may use the structure again. There is no reason why each chapter might not have its own intro, middle, and conclusion.

As a writer's reader of nonfiction, you have to look at the work presented to you and see if it has order or structure. Even if it doesn't use the method I described, does it have some sort of order, or is the information just jumbled all about? If it doesn't use the triangle-squares-triangle method, does it need to? Even if the information is organized, could it be restructured in a simpler manner? These are all questions to be considered in reading a non-fiction manuscript.

Fiction

There are many different structures that fiction can follow, and I'll be discussing those in greater detail ahead. However, all fiction has the following:

1. Beginning- Meet the characters and something happens to start the story
2. Middle- Events and challenges the main character(s) must face
3. Climax- Moment when character (traditionally) triumphs over obstacles
4. Resolution

Now, a common error I see in many manuscripts I read is the belief that plotting is great in short stories and novels, but isn't necessary in a picture book or easy reader. These authors maintain that since the word count is so low, they don't have room for a plot. (These same people maintain they don't have room for character development, which is also untrue.) When reading these manuscripts, you have to be extra vigilant that the author is actually presenting a story with a plot, not just a scene or an anecdote. To illustrate it can be done in so many short words, I looked at the 149 word Easy Reader *Biscuit Visits the Big City* by Alyssa Satin Capucilli from the *Biscuit* series.

In the beginning we are introduced to the dog, Biscuit, and Biscuit's owner, the first person narrator. They have come to the city to find their friend Jack. In the middle of the story, they look at buildings, meet other puppies, and bother pigeons. At the climax, Biscuit appears to have run away, but, no, he's just found Jack. The story resolves with Biscuit greeting Jack and

his other new friends. This may be a simple plot, but it's a complete one nonetheless. All works need a complete one like this or one of the more complex versions below.

Fairy Tale Plots

In Tracey Diles' *You Can Write Children's Books*, she maintains that all picture books have a main character who has to overcome 3 obstacles to achieve a goal. I, however, think this type of plotting extends beyond picture books into many types of fiction. I also think we're more familiar with this structure as a fairy tale plot.

1. Meet the Characters
2. Event Happens to start the story
3. Obstacle 1
4. Obstacle 2 – harder than the first
5. Obstacle 3 – hardest of all
6. Climax – overcome final obstacle
7. Ending

The *Magic Tree House* series of books uses this type of plot for its action. In the first book, *Dinosaurs Before Dawn*, we meet Jack and Annie, and they find the tree house in chapter 1. In chapters 2 and 3 they move the tree house back in time and explore. The first obstacle involves encounters with two scary, but friendly, dinosaurs. The second is a mother dinosaur who threatens the kids when she feels her own children are threatened. The third obstacle is a T. Rex. In the climax, both kids make it safely back to the tree house and find the book that will get them home. In the end, they get home.

The work you may be reading may use a similar structure although it may have a different number of obstacles. The basic form, though, is still the same.

3 Act Movie

Like a movie, some books can be divided into 3 acts. The characters in these books are facing obstacles based more on choices than external stimuli.

Act I

1. Meet character and problem almost immediately
2. Inciting Incident – gets character working on problem
3. Turning Point 1 – faced with a choice – character either doesn't decide or chooses wrong

Act II

1. Obstacles
2. Turning Point 2 – faced with similar or same decision, but this time chooses correctly

Act III

1. Climax – result of correct choice
2. Resolution

This plot is more likely to be found in longer works like mid-grade, teen, and adult novels. Although not necessary, this plot is often coupled with intense character introspection. However, you do find it in other story forms, so all readers should be aware of it. For my example, I used the picture book *Fancy Nancy and the Posh Puppy*.

In this book, Act I begins on the first page when we meet Nancy and learn she is getting a puppy. The inciting incident is that Nancy wants a type of puppy no one else in her family wants. At her first turning point she decides to convince her family by borrowing the neighbor's fancy dog. At the beginning of Act II, it appears to be going all right, but events rapidly go downhill. At the second turning point, Nancy agrees that the fancy kind of dog is not the kind for her family. At the climax in Act III, Nancy and her family find a mutt at the shelter that they love. In the end, Nancy decides the mutt is even better than the other dog.

Hero's Journey/Quest Plot

This is by far the most complex plot with the most steps. Originally detailed by Joseph Campbell, there are all sorts of variations on his originally detailed structure. Here, I'm going to give a brief summary of Christopher Vogler's adaptation. Although written for screenwriters, his *Writer's Journey*, should be required reading for all fiction writers. Get a copy. Read it. The Hero's Journey isn't just for fantasy writers. But until you do, use the following mile markers when evaluating someone else's quest manuscript.

1. Ordinary World – where the story begins, meeting character
2. Call to Adventure – presentation of problem or quest
3. Refusal of Call – self-explanatory (sometimes omitted)
4. Meet Mentor – can help hero prepare, answer call if previously refused
5. Crossing First Threshold – embarking on quest, first challenge
6. Tests, Allies, Enemies – obstacles and people who help and hinder
7. Approach to Inmost Cave – lead up to the most difficult challenge
8. Ordeal – biggest challenge
9. Reward – crisis, and achieving goals
10. Road Back – last obstacle on way home
11. Resurrection – climax – final purging and learning about self
12. Return – ending

There are lots of books that follow this pattern that are not fantasy. However, the above elements are easiest to identify in the following fantasies. I'm not going to detail each one out like I did for above examples. Instead, I recommend that you read one of the following and detail it out yourself. These clear examples would be good practice. It's much harder to identify elements in people's drafts although it can and should be done. This is one of your jobs as a reader. You are also there to help point out when an element isn't being achieved, or when the author is doing it particularly well.

Recommended reading:

- *The Hero and the Crown* by Robin McKinley
- *The Hobbit* by JR Tolkien
- *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan
- *Harry Potter Books 1-7* by JK Rowling – taken as a whole the entire series makes up a single quest plot. Within each book, Rowling utilizes various plot structures.

Now, the structures I've mentioned above are general guidelines and aren't the only way to order a plot. They can be combined or elements can be left out. The important thing you as the reader should be evaluating is whether or not the plot structure works for the story the author is trying to tell. Although what plot the author ultimately chooses to use is not your call, you can still make recommendations. If the author is trying to overcomplicate a story, let the person know. The hero's journey plot would not be any more appropriate for Biscuit's visit to the city than a simple plot structure would work in a 60,000 word epic quest. As a reader, you have to use your best judgment to help the author create the best story possible.

Pacing

Pacing is the rate that the plot progresses. This is one of the fuzzier areas of writing that relies more on instinct than anything else. You can just tell if the author is taking too long to get from plot element to plot element. You can also tell if the author has skipped or glossed over something. Either way, be sure to mention it to the author. Also, remember to tell the author when they're pacing works. Praise is just as useful as criticism.

Books with good pacing:

- *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer
- *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by JK Rowling
- *The Wednesday Wars* by Gary Schmidt
- *Emma Jean Lazarus Fell Out of a Tree* by Lauren Tarshis

Scene vs. Summary

One of the ways to adjust pacing is to use passages of scene and summary. Scenes are where you show every moment of action as it happens. This is where you find dialog. A scene, because it physically takes longer to read, can slow the pacing down. This is especially true of dialog. If the work seems to be moving too fast, you can suggest to the author to either add or lengthen scenes to slow the action down.

At the same time, you can speed the work along with summary. This often is necessary when the author has scenes that are impeding the action or flow of the story or are flat out unnecessary. Then a sentence or paragraph summarizing action may be more appropriate.

Book with great use of scene: *Holes* by Louis Sachar

Show vs. Tell

This is kind of like scene vs. summary. Show is the more descriptive version of relating what happens. However, unlike summary, which has a place in fiction, you almost never want to be telling things. If the work you are reading consistently tells instead of shows, you must let the author know.

An example of showing:

"I can't," I said. My eyes started to burn and water up. I bit my lip to try to distract myself. I would not cry.

An example of telling:

“I can’t,” I said sadly.

With the first example, we learn more about the character and are drawn into the story. The second just seems weak in comparison. Writing that does a lot of telling can always be strengthened by showing.

A symptom of telling is an overuse of adverbs (-ly words). If you *constantly* and *consistently* see adverbs, especially after speech tags or action verbs, recommend to the author that more descriptive language would be appropriate.

Books with good use of showing:

- *Goose Girl* by Shannon Hale
- *I’d Really Like to Eat a Child* by Sylviane Donnio (picture book)

Character

Every aspect of a work is important. Weakness in any one area can spoil an otherwise good work. However, nothing will ruin a story faster than a weak main character.

The main character is the reason the reader wants to read the story. No matter what the character is or isn’t doing, the character has to be of interest to the reader. I do not mean that the character has to be likeable, merely interesting – although it’s generally easier to win people over with a likeable character.

The major character in a work also has to grow. There has to be some sort of change in the character, preferably for the better. I do not mean that the character must learn something in a “the moral of this story is . . .” kind of way. The character should be a different person as a result of the action of the plot. This is true regardless of any style or level of fiction book. You will find growth in short stories, picture books, readers, etc.

When critiquing a short work or whole story, it is easy to tell if the character has grown. What’s harder is critiquing a few chapters at a time. Here you have to look at characters in snippets. It’s best then to focus on whether or not the character is sympathetic and appears to stay true to him/herself in that excerpt. It’s hard to do much else.

Books with strong main characters:

- *Chester* by Melanie Watt (picture book)
- Any of the *Amelia Bedelias* by Peggy Parish
- *Judy Moody* by Megan McDonald
- *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Coelfer (anti-hero, unlikeable character that you still want to win)
- *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (the writing of the characters is strong although the characters themselves are weak)

Voice

Every character has his/her own voice that you want to keep consistent. However, the overall work also has a voice that must be strong and stay consistent. Some people also call this the tone or the writing style. Styles, like characters, can be friendly or off-putting. When

reading someone's work, be sure to let him/her know if the voice is distracting. Be sure to keep in mind that this is a highly subjective impression that others may not share. Be sure to be tactful, but let them know. An author needs to know if the voice of the piece may be limiting the work's audience.

As an example, consider works written in the second person. This is where the author casts the reader as the main character in the story. Many people cannot stand this type of voice. They find it intrusive and bossy. If you are one of these people reading this type of work, politely let the author know. Such a visceral reaction should be shared, but just because it isn't working for you, doesn't mean the voice doesn't work. I once wrote a second person story that half the people who read it loved it and the other half hated it, all because of the voice.

Books with strong voices:

- *Spanking Shakespeare* by Jake Wizner (1st person)
- Any of the *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (3rd person)

Dialog

If a story has more than one character, and I highly recommend having more than one character, then inevitably the characters will communicate to one another in dialog. Dialog is one of the trickiest things to write, and it can be even trickier to read and provide good feedback. Dialog needs to sound the way people actually speak. It needs to use contractions, bad (but readable) grammar, and it needs to use vocabulary your character would actually speak. For example, pretend you have a modern ten year old boy as a main character. He wants to ask his mother for another slice of cake. Which would you expect him to say?

A. "Please, Mother, might I trouble your for another tidbit of that delicious desert?"

B. "Can I have some more?"

The answer is, of course, B. Perhaps if the ten year old is a character in a historical or fantastical story, A might be appropriate. Otherwise, the characters need to speak like actual, normal humans do today.

When reading someone else's work, be sure to let them know when dialog is not working. If the dialog is stilted or doesn't flow, suggest the author read it aloud. This allows the author to hear for him/herself where the rhythm breaks. If the author is using inappropriate vocabulary or unnatural sentences, mark them. Also be sure to remember to tell them whether the overall dialog is working. Don't just mark every individual problem.

Books with good dialog: Pretty much anything published has decent dialog. It may have bad characters or a terrible plot, but the dialog has been cleaned up.

Conflict

Conflict is interesting. Happy lives are nice to live but are uninteresting to read about. Period. No exceptions. The work you are reading must have some sort of conflict in it. If you are reading something where nothing seems to happen and you are very bored, chances are that the story lacks conflict. Sometimes the conflict is large and obvious like fights and wars. Other

times the conflict occurs entirely in a character's head. It doesn't matter what type the work has as long as it is interesting and there. I don't know what else to say. Stories have to have conflict.

Appropriateness/Genre Conventions

Last but not least, as you skim through the story one last time before giving it back to the author, you should make sure that the story is appropriate. By this I mean, does everything work? Does it make sense? Is the setting right, do the characters work, etc? You also need to make sure that the overall work is appropriate for the intended audience. A work with a graphic scene of incestuous rape does not need to make it into a book intended for the under five set. That would be an extreme example, but authors sometimes cook up crazy ideas. You also need to make sure that the author is at least aware of the conventions of whatever genre he/she is writing in. It's fine to break the rules of a genre, but only when an author does it intentionally. Be sure to let an author know if you find anything that is inappropriate or would be more appropriate in another story.

Congratulations! You now have all the basics skills to become a writer's reader. You know what to look for when you read, and I trust that you know how to kindly and politely tell authors when their works fall short of their goals. Always remember that when you meet or write your author, to start with something positive. No matter how bad the work may appear to you, you can always find something good. I know that this may seem like a lot of work to do for someone else's story, but you'll notice that being able to critique someone else's work makes you better able to critique your own. Also, one of the nice things I've always noticed about writers is the general lack of competitiveness. Everyone is more than willing to help everyone else. Being able to critique someone else's work helps bring you in to this community. It's a skill you will never regret having.

If you have any questions, email me at: madeline@cbaybooks.com. I would be happy to help and offer advice.

A Writer's Reader's Checklist:

Plotting:

- Does it have a plot or is it a scene or anecdote?
- What type of structure does the work have?
 - Nonfiction – Triangle, Squares, Triangle
 - Is the information organized and logical?
 - Does it need restructuring?
 - Fiction
 - Simple
 - Fairy Tale
 - 3 Act Movie
 - Hero's Journey
 - Does the work follow its chosen form? Is it working?
 - If steps are skipped, do they need to be added?
 - Is the story overcomplicated or too simple?
 - Does the overall story work?

Pacing:

- Is the overall pacing working?
- Are there spots where the pacing slows or speeds up unnecessarily?

Scene vs. Summary:

- Does the work use both scene and summary?
- Are there areas where scenes need to be fleshed out?
- Are there areas where scenes need to be summarized?
- Are there summarized areas that need to be fleshed out into scenes?

Show vs. Tell

- Is the author generally showing or telling?
- Does the author rely on adverbs to be descriptive?
- Does the person use figurative language? If not, why not?

Character

- Is the character likeable/sympathetic? If not, is the character still interesting enough to hold your interest?
- Does the character change over the course of the story? If not, how is the character growing?
- Does the character stay in character the entire time? In other words, if the character is an eight year old girl, does she seem like an eight year old girl?

Voice

- Is there a strong voice for the overall story?
- Does the voice work for the story?
- Does the voice limit the work in any way?

Dialog

- Is there dialog? If not, why not?
- Is it realistic?
 - Does it have contractions?
 - Does it use normal vocabulary?
 - Does it sound like something you would overhear if you were suddenly stuck in the same situation?
- Does it flow and sound natural?

Conflict

- Is there conflict? If not, why not?
- Is it interesting?

Appropriateness/Genre Conventions

- Is the work appropriate for the audience?
- Is everything in the work appropriate for the work?
 - Setting
 - Characters
 - Dialog
- Does the author appear to know the conventions for his/her chosen genre? If not, which ones are lacking?
- Does the author intentionally violate any of those conventions? Does it work for the story?