

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

10 Techniques for Authors

“Write like a Movie Director”

No doubt you have seen a lot of movies and TV shows over the years. Great! That means you have been learning the tricks of how to write better. Maybe you didn't realize it at the time. After all, most people these days tell me they enjoy watching a good movie to reading a book. There must be something about movies that grabs your attention and works on your imagination. I'm not telling you that's bad. Instead ...

I want you to write the way the Director uses a camera to tell the stories you see on the screen. If you can write like a Director creates a movie, you will write in new and fascinating ways. However, **before you start with these Top 10 Techniques, you should know the 2 Film Tips** guiding every Director. It all starts here:



Start in the middle: Instead of spending time explaining your setting, introducing people or plots, or giving background information, start the action or dialogue already in motion. Join the story in progress. You can explain who the characters are and why they are here later.



Show, don't tell: Instead of trying to explain what is happening, use imagery, symbolism, and conflicts to show what is happening. In movies you can simply use images and soundtracks, special effects and sound effects. In writing you can do the same thing, so long as you focus first on showing, not telling. Help your Reader see and feel and smell and taste the action. Always.

Okay then. Here are **10 Techniques** to help you write better. You don't need to learn all ten. **You can try one or two. Find ones that work for you.** Some of these techniques work better in one kind of story or genre and others work better in a different setting or story. Experiment. **Remember that as you write, have fun with it!** Your passion and joy will show in your words.

1

Zoom in: to bring a subject, scene, etc., into closeup while maintaining a clear focus

◆ **Use an Elaborator (Absolute Phrase).** An Elaborator is a phrase with a noun and a participle – so a combo of an Identifier and a Describer. That sounds worse than it is. Using one or more Elaborators allows you to zoom in on what's happening, adding details to the original SVO. Here are some absolutes as examples, and then a couple of sentences showing how they can work to zoom in.

her hair bristling	mouth foaming	chest panting furiously	lips smacking
the snake wiggling	paint chipped	way beyond repair	tires squealing

Engine smoking, gears grinding, the car went into the parking lot at top speed. or
The car went into the parking lot, engine smoking, gears grinding, at top speed.

◆ **Move down the ladder from General to Specific.** At the top of the ladder are abstract ideas like freedom and happiness. When you climb down to the bottom, the ladder stands on firm ground where you bump into things. To move down the ladder is to move away from big ideas and to talk about concrete things people can see and touch. **Start this process by asking yourself “Can I give an example of what I mean?”** Here's an example of moving down starting with: “What is God like?”

Outside their bedroom windows, beside the road, stood a giant elm, one of the few surviving in Greenwood. New leaves were curled in the moment after the bud unfolds, their color sallow, a dusting, a veil not yet dense enough to conceal the anatomy of the branches. The branches were sinuous, stately, constant; an inexhaustible comfort to her eyes. Of all things accessible to Ruth's vision, the elm most nearly persuaded her of a cosmic benevolence. If asked to picture God, she would have pictured this tree.

Movie Examples:

2

Throw a spotlight: to shine a strong light on a particular spot, as on a small area of a stage for making some object, person, or group the center of attention.

◆ **Add an Identifier.** An Identifier is a noun phrase that adds detail to another noun. The trick is that the Identifier needs to be right next to the noun it identifies or else the Reader gets confused. **Identifiers can be stacked, one after another, to add a spotlight on one person or place or thing with layer after layer of added detail.** Here are some examples of Identifiers in sentences.

*Jose's car, a 1936 red Ford roadster with whitewall tires, could not start its engine.
The jaguar prowled looking at them, two scared tourists, men who had lost their way.*

In the first sentence “a 1936 red Ford Roadster with whitewall tires” is the Identifier. In the second sentence there are two identifiers – the two Chunks after the word “them.”

◆ **Use a Chunk “out of order.”** Adjectives placed out of their usual order, as a chunk, act like Identifiers by adding layers of detail after a specific noun. Only here, the added details come as adjectives, not nouns. Otherwise, the process is the same.

Usually adjectives are placed in front of the nouns – here “old, dented, rough ...”
The old dented car was shocking. Its rough sounding engine sputtered and coughed.

Elementary School kids add detail by adding adjectives. Don’t do that. Instead use “Out of order adjectives,” which become chunks, separated by commas, after the noun:

*The car, old and dented, was shocking.
The car's engine, rough and sputtering, coughed loudly.*

Remember: the whole purpose of a spotlight is to give more details about someone or something in the story.

Movie Examples:

3

Zoom out: to adjust the lens of a camera so that the image slowly seems to become smaller and farther away. To “Zoom out” is to move back away from concrete details to a higher level of abstract ideas. When you focus in on a topic you look for an example to make the abstract idea more concrete. Here, you are asking the questions, “Why does this matter?” and “What does this mean?”

◆ **Move up the ladder from Specific to General.** JK Rowling, in the first of the Harry Potter stories introduces us to the Mirror of Erised. She begins with details but slowly pulls back from the mirror to leave us with the meaning of the mirror, describing first what Harry sees, and then zooming out to Harry’s ache of sadness and joy which describe his sense of being an orphan.

“Mom?” he whispered. “Dad?” They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry’s knobbly knees—Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

Movie Examples:

4

Pan the Camera: forcing the viewer to turn their head in order to take everything in, gradually revealing and incorporating off-screen space into the viewer's focus.

◆ **Add a Describer (Participial Phrase).** A Describer allows you to show continuing action in the form of the verb with an “ing” ending. If you are using the “-ed” version of the verb you can still pan; you are only doing so in the past. Describers can be even more powerful when stacked, one on another on another, so the picture in your text keeps moving in one long motion to reveal your topic.

Whispering softly to each other, hugging closely against the cold night air, the couple struggled to stay under the blanket during the long sleigh ride home.

The rocket started its short and sadly unsuccessful first flight, spinning and shining in the noonday sun, lifting off majestically from the launch pad, and only slightly tilting, uncomfortably, to one side.

Remember that with most all Chunks, these are moveable and can appear in different places within the same sentence, with different effects. In this second version, the subject and verb are left to the end (a periodic sentence) to add irony or suspense. Of the two, the second sentence is probably better because it leaves the news of the rocket's failure until after the panoramic view slowly watches the action, and then, reveals the flaw of tilting, before revealing that the rocket would crash.

The rocket, spinning and shining in the noonday sun, lifting off majestically from the launch pad, and only slightly tilting, uncomfortably, to one side, started its short and sadly unsuccessful first flight.

Movie Examples:

5

Go to Slow Motion: to adjust the lens of a camera so that the image slowly become smaller and farther away.

◆ **Use Layering with Chunks (Cumulative Sentences).** A Cumulative is an SVO with a lot of other Chunks layered into it, adding new levels of meaning. These longer sentences tend to slow the action down and put the story almost into a sense of slow motion. Compare this Technique to the next one: the Jump Cut, where things speed up and move quickly using shorter sentences. Here JK Rowling stitches together a number of Cumulative Sentences to let us experience the whole event as it is unfolding in the forbidden Reserve Section of the Library late at night.

Harry snapped the book shut, but the shriek went on and on, one high, unbroken, earsplitting note. He stumbled backward and knocked over his lamp, which went out at once. Panicking, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside -- stuffing the shrieking book back on the shelf, he ran for it. He passed Filch in the doorway; Filch's pale, wild eyes looked straight through him, and Harry slipped under Filch's outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor, the book's shrieks still ringing in his ears.

◆ **Use Delay with Chunks (Periodic Sentences).** As we saw above with the example from “Pan the Camera,” sometimes it is better to add all the Chunks at the start of the sentence and delay the arrival of the main sentence (SVO) until the last words. **This is not a technique to use often, but it can be very useful when you want to build suspense.** Charles Dickens used Periodic Sentences effectively, drawing the Reader through a long sentence made up of Chunks, until getting to a very short SVO in the final words. Like this classic periodic sentence from *A Tale of Two Cities*:

And when Jarvis Lorry saw the kindled eyes, the resolute face, the calm strong look and bearing of the man whose life always seemed to him to have been stopped, like a clock, for so many years, and then set going again with an energy which had lain dormant during the cessation of its usefulness, he believed.

Movie Examples:

6

Cuts – Match, Smash, and Jump: In film, cuts are used to abruptly/quickly move from one scene to another, from one person to another, or from one view of a character to another of the same character a short time later. In writing, a Cut can be a short break from the action or a quick change in the action. Authors can perform this with the addition of a very short paragraph or sentence – sometimes of only a few words. Think of long sentences as taking you on a journey, keeping you moving, showing details as you continue to move forward. Short sentences slam on the brakes. And sometimes you want that break for any of many reasons.

- ◆ Employ strategic fragments or short sentences, especially after long ones.

Of course they soon came down after him, hooting and hallooing, and hunting among the trees. But they don't like the sun: it makes their legs wobble and their heads giddy. They could not find Bilbo with the ring on, slipping in and out of the shadow of the trees, running quick and quiet, and keeping out of the sun; so soon they went back grumbling and cursing to guard the door. Bilbo had escaped.

Here, Tolkien (in *The Hobbit*) uses a very long sentence, panning through the action, showing the action as Bilbo runs away from a cave full of goblins. After sentences of 15 words, 16 words, and the mighty 42-word sentence, Tolkien gives us a short and simple 3-word sentence as contrast. This shows how short sentences gain power by being close to a series of longer ones. On the other hand, O'Flaherty uses what is called "Rat-a-tat" prose in describing a scene (*The Sniper*). The short sentences here come one after the other, with a pattern or beat, like the character's short breaths or quickly beating heart.

The turret opened. A man's head and shoulders appeared, looking toward the sniper. The sniper raised his rifle and fired. The head fell heavily on the turret wall. The woman darted toward the side street. The sniper fired again. The woman whirled round and fell with a shriek into the gutter.

NOTE: Here's another use for those short sentences! Thomas Wolfe, famous author and wit, once complained: "If you ever have a preposterous statement to make, say it in five words or less ... because we are used to five word sentences being the gospel truth."

Movie Examples:

7

Fade to black: to make an image disappear gradually, especially by becoming darker, until the image is totally gone or out of sight. Movies fade to black in order to bring closure to one scene without jumping too quickly away. This is a gentler way of changing moods or scenes than using a Cut. Writers can effectively use this especially at the end of a chapter. However, any paragraph can fade to black when needed. Here's one way to accomplish this:

◆ Add in just one more clause (As if, Even so, Just like). Adding in that one last simile or metaphor or image allows the text to fade slowly away. By adding this last image the text does not have as hard an ending, but engages the reader's imagination and softens the transition into what comes next.

He was tired, so very tired. But he did not know what to do next. His mind raced with conflicting thoughts, arguments he kept playing out within himself, since he could not yet choose the right path, as if he were a child all alone, and lost in a forest.

◆ Slow the action by panning over the distance or zooming out. Think of the ending of the classic Western movies – where the last shot shows the hero on his horse riding off into the sunset. You can do the same thing as you write, using the techniques we have already seen above for panning and zooming out. Here Tolkien ends the action, and the day, by fading out to the stars overhead.

In the rock-chamber there would have been room for a hundred, and there was a small chamber further in, more removed from the cold outside ... There they laid their burdens; and some threw themselves down at once and slept, but the others sat near the outer door and discussed their plans. In all their talk they came perpetually back to one thing: where was Smaug? They looked West and there was nothing, and East there was nothing, and in the South there was no sign of the dragon, but there was a gathering of very many birds. At that they gazed and wondered; but they were no nearer understanding it, when the first cold stars came out.

Movie Examples:

8

Cue the soundtrack: add music in the background, or sound effects, to set a tone or to give emotional feeling to a scene. This is easy enough to accomplish with a movie that actually has a soundtrack. When writing, you need to add the soundtrack to your text through words and imagery. Just remember the golden rule of writing: **Show, don't tell!** Think of it this way – think of the difference between a story and a report. “Rosenblatt argued that readers read for two reasons: information and experience ... Reports convey information. Stories create experience. Reports transfer knowledge. Stories transport the reader, crossing boundaries of time, space, and imagination. The report points us there. The story takes us there” (Clark, *Writing Tools*). Your job is to help readers truly experience your story.

◆ **Add Imagery (Show vs. Tell)** We think about ideas with our heads, but we experience life with our senses. Make sure to engage at least 2-3 of the reader’s senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell). Trying to engage all 5 all the time would be silly, but you can engage readers’ senses through your choice of descriptions.

◆ **Create a Mood through use of Tone** The tone of your words can emotionally connect with your readers, changing a text from one experience to a totally different one. For example, Dickens, in *A Tale of Two Cities* describes the weather, but gives us a sense of danger and mystery as well, through the use of tone:

There was a steaming mist in all the hollows, and it had roamed in its forlornness up the hill, like an evil spirit, seeking rest and finding none. A clammy and intensely cold mist, it made its slow way through the air in ripples that visibly followed and overspread one another, as the waves of an unwholesome sea might do. It was dense enough to shut out everything from the light of the coach-lamps ...

In *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coehlo, we hear about the wonder of human life, of how we are all connected in an eternal whole. The tone here is very different from a bumper-sticker version like: “Life is short; the world is eternal; we’re in this together.” Instead:

We are travelers on a cosmic journey, stardust, swirling and dancing in the eddies and whirlpools of infinity. Life is eternal. We have stopped for a moment to encounter each other, to meet, to love, to share. This is a precious moment. It is a little parenthesis in eternity.

The author can choose any words to express meaning. Here the choice of words like “cosmic journey,” and “whirlpools of infinity” or moment, encounter and precious” all add to the effect the author is attempting to create

◆ **Use Dialogue to establish a mood** Along with description, dialogue can change the tone of any text. Are people arguing and yelling, or yelling to be heard over a crowd? Are people whispering so as not to be caught, or whispering lovingly after a tender moment together? How people talk can be as important as what they say too.

NOTE: Novelist Elmore Leonard suggests that readers may often skip over parts of a text as they read: *“Thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them. What the writer is doing, he’s writing, perpetrating hoopededoodle, perhaps taking another shot at the weather, or has gone into the character’s head, and the reader either knows what the guy is thinking or doesn’t care. I’ll bet you don’t skip dialogue.”* (Clark, *Writing Tools*)

NOTE TOO: In a report you add quotes, not “as action but as an action stopper, a place in which someone comments on what has happened ... they interrupt the progress of the narrative.” In writing a story, dialogue “thickens the plot” because the words are “overheard.” So, in a story, “dialogue transports us to a place and time where we get to experience the events” as they happen (Clark, *Writing Tools*).

Example: from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Rowling wants to set up the dangers of Quidditch by showing how nervous Harry is before his first match. Note the foreshadowing here, as something bad will happen on the field soon. Also note the irony/humor as Seamus piles ketchup on his food (symbolizing the coming bloodshed).

The next morning dawned very bright and cold. The Great Hall was full of the delicious smell of fried sausages and the cheerful chatter of everyone looking forward to a good Quidditch match.

“You’ve got to eat some breakfast.” Ron said, pouring syrup on his waffles.

“I don’t want anything.”

“Harry, you’ve got to eat something,” said Zoe, taking a bite from a sausage.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Just a bit of toast,” wheedled Hermione.

“No, thank you.”

Harry felt terrible. In an hour’s time he’d be walking onto the field.

“Harry, you need your strength,” said Seamus Finnigan. “Seekers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team.”

“Thanks, Seamus,” said Harry, watching Seamus pile ketchup on his sausages.

Movie Examples:

9

Change the camera angle: placing the camera in different positions (low angle, high angle, hand-held, over the shoulder) gives different perspectives to the audience. Clark explains: "Before there was cinema, writers wrote cinematically. Influenced by the visual arts - by portraits and tapestries - authors have long understood how to shift their focus in and out to capture both character and landscape ... Simple descriptions of standard camera angles should help you imagine how to use your 'word cameras' for a variety of effects ..." (Clark, *Writing Tools*).

- ◆ **Arial view.** The writer looks down on the world, as if standing atop a skyscraper or viewing the ground from a blimp. **Example:** "*Hundreds and hundreds of black South African voters stood for hours on long, sandy serpentine lines waiting to cast their ballots for the first time.*"
- ◆ **Establishing shot.** The writer stands back to capture the setting in which action takes place, describing the world that the reader is about to enter, sometimes creating a mood for the story. **Example:** "*Within seconds, as dusty clouds rose over the school grounds, their great widths suggesting blasts of terrifying force, bursts of rifle fire began to sound, quickly building to a sustained and rolling roar.*"
- ◆ **Middle distance.** The camera moves closer to the action, close enough to see the key players and their interaction. This is the common distance for most stories written for the newspaper. **Example:** "*Scores of hostages survived, staggering from the school even as intense gunfire sputtered and grenades exploded around them. Many were barely dressed, their faces strained with fear and exhaustion, their bodies bloodied by shrapnel and gunshots.*"
- ◆ **Close-up.** The camera gets in the face of the subject, close enough to detect anger, fear, dread, sorrow, irony, the full range of emotions. **Example:** "*His brow furrowed and the crow's feet deepened as he struggled to understand ... The man pulled at the waistband of his beige workpants and scratched his sun-aged face. He starred at her, stalling for time as he tried to understand, but afraid to say he didn't.*"
- ◆ **Extreme Close-up.** This writer focuses on an important detail that would be invisible from a distance: the pinky ring on the mobster's finger, the date circled on the wall calendar, the can of beer atop a police car. **Example:** "*The hand of the cancer-care nurse scooped the dead angel fish out of the office aquarium. Patients at this clinic had enough on their minds. They didn't need another reminder of mortality.*"

10

Create a Pattern & Break it: Our minds like patterns – whether in visual settings (like a mosaic floor, or cubicles in an office building, or rows of people sitting at a bar). In grammar patterns can be built using parallel techniques in grammar, since “when two or more ideas are in parallel they are easier to grasp” and remembered (Clark, *Writing Tools*).

◆ **Parallelism.** The repetition of ideas in similar grammatical patterns are more memorable than the same ideas repeated randomly. Parallelism refers to the repetition of a grammatical pattern as well as a series of ideas or themes. For example, here is parallel repetition by Dr. M L King, Jr:

From the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire, let freedom ring. From the mighty mountains of New York, let freedom ring. From the mighty Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snow capped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!

◆ **Use Repetition to create expectation, then change it up.** Once you have created an expectation, change things for your reader as a surprise, and for a greater effect (emphasis) or for a release of tension (humor). Continuing with Dr. King’s words, he moves the pattern to the Southern states where civil rights struggles were more difficult, and then changes the pattern to a point where he can look into the future when freedom has come at last. These words follow from the pattern above:

But not only there; let freedom ring from the Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain in Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we’re free at last!”

Movie Examples:

Make sure to also checkout:

5 Tools for Better Sentences (Chunks)

5 Tips to Beat the Boss (Writing like playing a video game)

5 Tips for Repetition (Again)

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