

How to write a story

A dozen suggestions for the young writer

1. Try **telling** your story to your brothers and sisters.
2. Try **writing** your story as part of a letter to a pen pal.
3. Make up characters from **real people** you know.
4. But **don't tell** the reader what sort of people they are.
5. Rather, let him find out from **what they say and do**.
6. And it's best to keep some things a secret from your reader!
7. Only write about things **you really know** about.
8. Put in some **pictures** and maybe a map.
9. Make sure you **don't contradict** yourself as the story grows.
10. Write about **what delights you**: then it may delight a reader.
11. Gently **awaken desire** in your reader for Truth and Beauty, Goodness and God.
12. Finally, **read** the finished story aloud and **post** it to friends to read.

For the parents and teachers of young writers

MY OWN WRITING is primarily in religious education and particularly in writing Questions & Answer catechisms — somewhat hard tack because such a catechism is only a skeleton, but thereby a necessity (because without a skeleton a body is a jellyfish), yet not sufficient by itself, because it needs a convincing teacher to humanize the skeleton with a heart and vital organs, flesh and blood.

As a protest against the Catholic religious education establishment's anti-catechism stance, and partly for its usefulness and for its fun, I constructed a catechism of campcraft with 36 Questions & Answers which were later elaborated into 50 in the appendix of *Bush Boys*; (their latest version is in *Handouts* no. 2).

MY FIRST ADVENTURE STORY, *Bush Boys, An Outdoor Adventure and The ABC of Camping*, was a further protest against trendy religious educators and their 'life-situation catechesis'. Very well, I would give them a life-situation story to enflame the camping catechism and exemplify its 'doctrine', a 'doctrine' which could *not* be taught effectively by a story alone.

There really were two boys 'Greg' and 'Bernie' — though I blended their characters with others for the stories — and their cousins really did come to live with them because of the death of a parent, just as 'Pete' and 'John' come for a camping holiday.

Bush Boys has many themes: family life (so the boys must have sisters who become more prominent in the third book); boyhood, 'boys will be boys', against unisex (I detest political correctness); lots of outdoor adventures as the alternative to TV, videos and computer games (often so seductively addictive, crippling creativity and subversive in morals); ecumenism of a Catholic and an Anglican family; and the rugged beauty of the bush of the Blue Mountains.

I GOT MUCH HELP from famous authors: **Robert**

Louis Stevenson claimed that his *Treasure Island* was based on “short chapter and no girls!”. Here I

must confess that my own best critics were girls! Also, he said, the *Hispaniola* “must be a schooner because I could sail a schooner,” teaching the necessity of an author knowing what he is talking about.

J.R.R. Tolkien said stories need “the inner consistency of reality” (which is the principle of not contradicting yourself); the happy ending which he called “the *euclatrophic* tale”; with “man the sub-creator who makes worlds of his own *because he is made in the image of a Maker*”; of the moral dimension in fantasy with “the importance of keeping promises

even with intolerable consequences, and observing prohibitions.” He also said you must “make your map first” [or as you go along] “or you'll never be able to make the map fit the story afterwards.”

Joseph Conrad insisted that “the author must keep secret from

the reader at least one or two traits of character about his hero.” This helps the characters 'live' in the author's mind and so they are more likely to live in the minds of the reader. He also speaks of the “secret inner life of each man's mind.”

Marjorie Barnard helped my father become a writer: she insisted that the author should not tell the reader what the characters were like, rather, the reader should find out for himself through what was said and done, just as happens in real life.

W.E. Johns, of 'Biggies' fame, provides the reader with Ginger, a more youthful character, with whom the reader can identify and through whose eyes the main characters are seen and heard and admired.

Richmal Crompton kept 'William' eleven years old for over 40 years while the historical and social background changed.

Arthur Ransome concealed the ages of most of his fictitious children so that different aged readers would more readily identify with them.

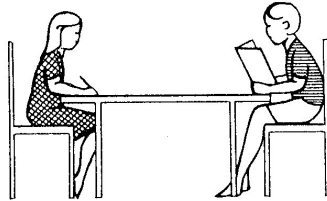
Mary Grant Bruce wrote from passionate love of the Australian bush and the superiority of country life.

Ray Harris, who wrote the *Turkey* adventures, gives encouragement to lesser writers: “None of my boys' books has been acclaimed the Great Australian Novel. But surely one can take a piece of Chinese advice: ‘The woods would be very silent if only those birds sang who sing best’.”

G.K. Chesterton said, “Literature is a luxury, fiction a necessity,” (though he has critics who reverse it, ‘Fiction is a luxury, literature a necessity’).

Cardinal Newman got his deep insights into human nature, and his compassion for fallen man, from the characters in the Old Testament. Bible reading is well worthwhile and even for non-religious writing.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the master story-teller: there is nothing in all the literature of the whole world to compare with His parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan — so very much packaged so small. Indeed, “Never man spoke like this Man!”



More Ideas for Writing a Story

Frank Devine, well-known columnist in *The Australian*, has simple advice for writing good English: "When in doubt, put in a full-stop."

Little children's letters go even further — they use simple one-clause sentences without any subordinate clauses, without parenthetical phrases, and often without any punctuation at all — except for a lonely full stop at the end of the one and only paragraph. The result has a beautiful freshness, vibrant with young life, and a sheer joy to read.

GROUP DYNAMICS

GROUP DYNAMICS enriches life. In writing, it makes the characters live in the author's mind, and so they live in the minds of his readers. Group dynamics is about how a group of people interact with each other. It is the psychology of their interpersonal relationships. A writer learns this psychology from shrewd observation and from his own reading.

Many a two-some of Tom and Dick, or Tom and Harry, or Dick and Harry, lapse into bickering, though all three together get on famously. A third person can change the dynamics of their conversation, and thereby improve the relationships within the group. A third person can bring out the goodwill in the other two.

These days **encounter groups** often abuse group dynamics, using it for manipulation and brainwashing. Beware of any group where the leader dictates that no one may gainsay what another has said, thus giving error a free rein.

Just in passing, group dynamics is important for discipline. For instance, if a naughty child is spanked in the presence of siblings, his shame, sorrow and purpose of amendment might be obscured or even lost in bravado, or in the shame of humiliation (rather than humility). Others being present alters the relationship with his parent.

In the army, the troops were sometimes ordered to entertain themselves by giving lecturettes on any topic they liked — as long as it was *not* religion, politics or the army: their 'group dynamics' could not rise to these without surrender to discord.

Group dynamics is vital for making your characters really life-like. Develop the interactions among them based on their individual personalities.

Examples of Group Dynamics in *Bush Boys*

In *Bush Boys*, Pete and John relate to each other as older and younger brother, similarly Greg and Bernie. Next, Pete relates to Greg as a boy cousins of the same age, similarly John and Bernie. Further, they also pair off in another way: the mischievous Pete and Bernie contrast with the more serious Greg and John. Finally, as a gang of four boys they are completely unaware of, and uninterested in, their interpersonal relationships.

In *Cuthbert Joins the Bush Boys* the addition of Cuthbert (a cousin of Greg and Bernie on their mother's side) subtly alters the relationships. They are now a gang of five, but the group tends to divide into the seniors Greg and Pete, and the juniors Cuthbert, Bernie and John. That's what life is like. Relationships are fascinating, sensitive and so fragile.

INTRODUCING NEW CHARACTERS

INTRODUCE new characters a few at a time or the reader will get them mixed up. Repeat a trait of character with the second or third mention of a new name. Dickens used such repetitions for humour.

READING ALOUD?

AN AUTHOR can facilitate reading aloud by putting any vital 'prompts' for direct speech ahead of the inverted commas, e.g. "he whispered" or "he roared", so that the reader can do justice to Them.

An author should read his story aloud, even if only to himself, or into a tape recorder, to discover his clumsier sentences and any ambiguities or contradictions which might puzzle or annoy the reader.

ALTERNATIVES TO "HE SAID"

IN BIGGLES! *The Life Story of Capt. W.E. Johns*, Peter Berresford Ellis & Jennifer Schofield point out that Johns crafted his prose with many variants to the ubiquitous "he said". For instance, Erich von Stalhein "purred" — for fans of Biggies this conveys a rich complex of ideas that exactly suits Biggies' many encounters with his arch-enemy: the velvet glove with an iron fist; outward pleasantness with veiled menace; a cat sinuous in sleekness before it uses its claws.

The following list was drafted from a quick breeze through some chapters of *Sergeant Bigglesworth, C.I.D.*, plus additions from some active young minds:

ACCUSED, acknowledged, admitted, admonished, advised, advocated, affirmed, agreed, alleged, announced, answered, argued, asked, assented, asserted, averred, beamed, began, bleated, blurted, breathed, butted in, called, capitulated, cautioned, chortled, chuckled, cleared his throat, commented, complained, concluded, concurred, confessed, confirmed, consented, continued, conversed, convulsed, corrected, cried, cursed, decided, declared, decreed, demanded, demurred, denounced, directed, disagreed, drawled, echoed, emphasized, exaggerated, exclaimed, explained, gasped, grated, greeted, grizzled, ground out, growled, grumbled, grunted, guessed, gulped, gurgled, hissed, hollered, howled, inquired, insisted, interjected, interposed, interrupted, intoned, invited, jeered, joked, lamented, looked (thoughtful), moaned, mumbled, murmured, mused, muttered, nodded, observed, offered, opined, ordered, panted, persisted, pleaded, pointed out, praised, predicted, promised, prompted, pronounced, protested, puffed, purred, put in, quarreled, queried, questioned, quizzed, rapped out, rasped out, rebuked, recited, reiterated, remarked, reminded (*Johns often uses remind without an object, but you can supply one*), repeated, replied, reproached, requested, responded, resumed, retorted, returned, roared, scoffed, screamed, screeched, shouted, shrugged, sighed, smiled, snapped, snarled, sneered, sniggered, snivelled, sobbed, spat, spoke, started, stiffened, stressed, struggled, stuttered, suggested, summarized, summed up, swore, taught, thundered, told, urged, warned, was the answer, was the reply, went on, whimpered, whined, whinged, whispered, wondered, yawned, yelled, yelped.

PUBLISH YOUR STORY?

Yes! Use letter, fax, email, website...