

STORY CRAFT

By **NORMA R. YOUNGBERG**

VOLUME I

STORY CRAFT

by

NORMA YOUNGBERG

A creative writing manual for all who would
write and sell for publication.

Volume I

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Can writing be taught?

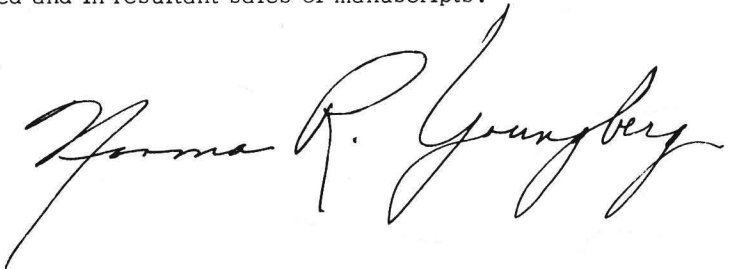
Yes, as gold mining is taught -- furnish the miner with adequate tools, demonstrate their use, point out the rich vein, and insist that he carry his own lamp.

Any person with average ability, time, and persistence may become a competent writer.

These lessons are for the average person. They are slanted for writers' groups as well as the individual writer and are therefore loosely organized and self-contained in order that they may be rearranged into other settings and sequences more suitable to particular needs.

The course is intended as a smorgasbord of topics, and each provides a springboard for class discussion centered in the material presented, but radiating outward into the creative experience of each potential writer.

These lessons are not experimental. They have been used for several years in writing classes with excellent results both in quality of work produced and in resultant sales of manuscripts.

A large, elegant handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Norma R. Youngberg". The signature is written in dark ink and occupies the lower right portion of the page.



NORMA YOUNGBERG

FOREWORD

The instinct to communicate is an inborn trait found among all peoples of every race. Before man possessed a vocabulary from which to record the written word, he transmitted messages through pictures and symbols on the walls of caves and on the faces of stone cliffs. It is little wonder that today we find literally thousands of men and women studying the art of Creative Story Telling.

The Department of Adult Education, San Jose Unified School District has been fortunate in having Mrs. Norma Youngberg as a regular staff member for the last five years. During this period she has tested and perfected her own personal skill in communication as she has proved the materials contained in this volume.

Mrs. Youngberg accompanied her husband into the mission fields of the oriental jungles where she taught both children and adults, learning and developing her skills in oral communication.

On her return to United States she turned to the written word to record, in juvenile books and short stories, tales gathered during the twenty years of her Far Eastern experience.

Evidence of the success of Mrs. Youngberg's teaching methods is measured not by her personal attainment of eight published volumes, but by the results obtained by her students. Rarely does a month go by that does not show checks aggregating a total of several hundred dollars earned by embryo authors.

It is our sincere belief that rich dividends will accrue to the students who diligently pursue the principles set forth in this new volume by Norma Youngberg.

Signed H. Price Webb
 Director of Adult Education
 For San Jose Unified Schools
 San Jose, California

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STORY CRAFT

CHAPTER ONE

SO YOU WANT TO WRITE

We sometimes hear people say that anyone can write. This is almost true, for any child who cannot write on reaching the fourth grade is classified as retarded. The truth is that many can write but few can publish.

We come to a writing class, or a writing course, because we want to create stories or articles or poems that publishers will buy and that readers will read. This instruction is often labeled Creative Writing. It could more accurately be called Creative Story-telling. There are many writers but few story-tellers.

In ancient days when tribal knowledge was handed down by the spoken word, story-tellers were highly regarded. They were the historians of the tribe, keepers of the magic secrets, preservers of customs, the authority on all matters of precedent and decisions. Story-tellers were venerated, and with good reason.

In our time real story-tellers are also appreciated. They are acclaimed and richly rewarded, because they are few and valuable. Also because they belong to all of us in a special way, for every great story-teller is rooted deep in the common soil of humanity, and the stories he tells come forth, wet with travail, fresh and vital as newborn babes, and as full of meaning.

It is no light thing to aspire toward a career in writing or story-telling. It is a magnificent career, rich with compensation and full of satisfying delight, but it levies a high fee on the would-be entrant. Those who think that with a few short lessons they will become professional writers should reconsider, for they have come to this new venture with a false hope.

A professional writing career takes as much and as thorough preparation as a career in medicine or law. It takes as much time and more creative thinking. It not only carries great responsibility but it is the most demanding of all the arts. Writing is hard and exacting work, but the most rewarding of all callings for those who have the faith and industry to follow through to success.

It may be that you have thought of taking up writing as a hobby. This is fine, and some people do manage to keep it as a side line. But it is possible that some day your hobby will take you by the throat and demand more than you intended to give. Many a would-be writer has turned back because he found that he must change his whole way of life in order to become a public story-teller.

If you elect to continue with this writing course and learn the rudiments of writing technique, you are deciding to become a different person from what you are at this moment. You must, from this day, become, in fact, two people -- a creative artist, dreamer of dreams, and a stern critic. You must not only be these two persons, you must learn to manage both these selves so that they help one another and never get in each other's way. Only by doing this can you avoid frustration. More than one writer who showed great talent has failed in his effort because he was not able to separate his two selves and set them to working in harmony.

Besides this matter of coping with a dual personality there are other things an aspiring writer must learn. He must learn to recognize a story. True, there are stories all around us, but there are good and bad people all around us, too. It would be difficult for us to classify them off-hand as they pass us on the street. A writer must develop such a story sense that he will not only "smell" a story when it comes within range, but he will know at once whether it is his story -- a story he can personally deal with and develop into a marketable piece of merchandise.

The successful writer must know his own story when he sees it even as he knows the face of his own son in a room full of children.

Another thing a writer must learn is to regard what he has written, not as a precious design chiseled in marble, or even set in cement, but as malleable material, pliable stuff like clay, that may have to be molded over and over again until just the right shape and line are achieved.

Also, a writer must learn to take criticism. The sensitivity of a writer is what makes him unique, perceptive, and expressive. This same sensitivity makes him vulnerable to the chilling breath of criticism and the disappointments that must come before he writes well enough to sell his work.

Most of the criticism given in creative writing classes is kindly and constructive, but it is inevitable that sooner or later the blow will fall. A rejection slip will come, or some person may suggest that our darling creation is less than a masterpiece. **This discipline we must not only bear with patience, but we must learn to profit from it.** Few corrective measures are pleasurable. We must approach our work objectively.

A writer must work hard whether he feels like it or not. The professional writer does not wait on inspiration. Of course, inspiration often does strike him, but it usually hits him as he sits in front of his typewriter. Nothing courts inspiration like hard work.

A writer must learn to see beneath the surface of things. He must be, of all people, most observant. He must hear the unspoken word. He must see the unshed tear. He must smell the violets and fresh snowfalls of all his springs and winters. He must taste food the way it felt on his tongue when he was a boy and all his senses keen and questing. He must feel not only the skin he lays his hand upon but the pulse beating and the blood coursing under that skin. All his senses must be alive and vibrant with expectation and always reaching for new experience.

A writer needs to live fully, deeply, and perceptively. This does not mean that he must travel in foreign countries or indulge in a variety of sins and pleasures. Thoreau lived alone on Walden Pond, but the adventures he met there still make excellent reading. Nothing is so important for a writer as living in depth. There is no substitute for it.

A writer must read. Aside from actual living and thinking, **no exercise is so enriching.** Choose the type of reading that will prepare you for the particular field of writing for which you aim.

Of all the writer's assets, time is perhaps the most valuable and necessary. Without time to write, all other effort is in vain. Even a small amount of time regularly set aside for writing yields an incredible amount of finished material. Five hundred words a day will net the rough draft of a magazine story in ten days, or a fifty-thousand word book in one hundred days.

Men and women in all the major professions spend thousands of hours learning the skills of their trade. Should a writer expect to do less?

CHAPTER TWO

STORY IDEAS AND HOW TO TREAT THEM

In writing either fiction or non-fiction, the basic requirement is ideas. It is an idea that forms the nucleus for your creative work, whether it be a short and simple story for children or a full-blown piece of fiction for one of the big slick magazines.

Many an editor has purchased a mediocre piece of writing because it contained a great story. The all-important thing is the story -- the idea behind the writing.

The basic story idea is an intrinsic thing like gold. It may be melted and run in with ashes and soot and other debris, but the weight of it can be felt and the shine detected by anyone who picks it up. The most important thing for the beginning writer is to come up with a good story idea, one that is fresh and new, different and arresting.

Perhaps the easiest thing for the beginning writer is to set down some true story from life as he has lived it, or something that has come to his knowledge out of another person's life. We should cultivate the faculty of discerning stories in the happenings around us, in newspaper reports and other things we read. A mind teeming with ideas is an asset to any writer, but not everyone is gifted with this facility. Many of us have to search for ideas. Here are a few suggestions of places we may turn to find the germs of future stories:

1. Think back over your own childhood and try to remember any outstanding adventure you experienced. Perhaps you learned some important lesson the hard way. Perhaps something happened to reveal to you a basic truth of life. Maybe you learned tolerance or truthfulness or diligence. Maybe you were able to conquer fear in a crisis. These are all potential story ideas.

2. Cultivate the friendship and listen to the conversation of old people who lived in a different time than ours. Some of them can tell marvelous stories. One ninety-six year old woman told me the best Indian story I ever heard. Old folk are rich mines of stories, and they are usually glad to tell them to anyone who will bend a sympathetic ear.
3. Cultivate an interest in and a love for people. People and their lives make stories. Most of the great stories of the world have been written about humble people. It may well be that you have a number of wonderful stories waiting to be gathered right under your own roof.
4. Read, read. You can never read enough of the right sort of books and magazines. It is impossible to cram the human mind with too many facts, too much information. With very few exceptions, great writers are avid readers. With very few exceptions beginning writers in writing classes have read pitifully little of the world's great literature or even the current writings of our present day. This must be corrected. Ask some qualified person to outline a reading program for you. Slant it toward the type of literature that most interests you, but do not neglect poetry. Everyone should read some poetry.
5. Sometimes one story idea is not heavy enough to carry a full-sized quota of words. You may need to combine it with another idea. This is called "association of ideas", and it is something all writers must learn to do. It is fascinating work, like making a dress of two colors of material and then trimming it with buttons or lace. The finished effect can be even more pleasing than a dress made of one color.
6. Another source of ideas is observation. One day I was riding on a bus and I saw a couple on the street. The woman appeared angry and twice turned as if to go back. Each time, her husband jerked her around and dragged her along. Immediately my mind began to construct the story behind this little scene. If we keep our eyes open, there are ideas all around us. The inventive mind will glimpse a look, catch a word, and a story plot will spring up like a mushroom.

Of course it is important to know which story ideas may be developed into full-blown plots. In a genuine story idea, there is conflict or a problem. If there is no conflict, the idea is just an anecdote or an incident and may not lend itself to story development. The beginning writer needs to study this particular skill of ferreting out real story germs.

Another important skill for the beginner to master is to weigh the idea and judge how long a story it will make. Thousands of new writers have written up a simple little plot into two or three thousand words. This will never do. It is a good plan to make your story just as short as you can and then cut it. There is much more overwriting than underwriting.

It may be that you have a tiny story plot that will do for small children. It should be written up in less than 600 words for some magazine that appeals to toddlers. It is excellent practice to work a fully-plotted story into 600 words. Write it over and over until it is polished like a gem and says exactly what you want it to say.

Perhaps you have a heavier idea that may require from 1000 to 1500 words. It will work up into a story for juniors or it might possibly be good enough for a short-short magazine story. However, the short-short market is a most difficult one to hit, and no beginner should expect to make it without a great deal of writing and practice. Still, it might happen to you.

If you have an idea that contains the germ of a heavy plot, it may take up to 5000 words to contain it. Or you may have such a great idea that by associating other ideas with it, you may be able to write a novelette of 25,000 words.

Much of the skill of the writer lies in his ability to weigh his idea and judge the kind of treatment it needs and how many words it will carry.

Most important of all at this stage of your study, is to find ideas and work on them.

CHAPTER THREE

TELLING AND SHOWING

You have two ways of finding out what goes on at the ball game this afternoon. You may go and watch it, or someone may tell you about it. Which way will please you more?

As a general rule, people like to see for themselves. It is kind of the neighbors or family or the daily paper or the radio announcer to let us know how our favorite baseball hero distinguished himself in the big league game, but we would rather have been sitting right there in the bleachers watching every inning and yelling our heads off with the rest of the crowd. This is why television has taken such a hold on our national life. People like to see things.

The professional writer knows this and he tries to let people see, instead of telling them about what happens in his stories.

TELLING is also called narration. This is the most economical way of imparting information. One may sum up the whole plot of a novel in one paragraph of narrative. And narrative is useful in all kinds of writing. It bridges the parts of the story that come between scenes. It recalls past events with a minimum of wordage and thus helps to move the story along without spending too much wordage on non-essentials, or bogging it down with too many details.

Don remembered the day he had won the race
at Dartmoor.

Here we have an example of a whole day's activities being summed up in one sentence.

Those were the years when her family was growing
up, years full of work and hope and love.

Here we have one sentence summing up years of a woman's life.

Narrative has an important and valuable place in writing, and the writer who tries to handle his material entirely in dramatic action and dialogue will find it paced too fast and out of balance. Unless he intersperses narrative, he will have a lop-sided presentation.

The skill in this thing comes from knowing what to tell (narrative), what to let the reader hear (dialogue), and what to let him see (dramatic action). The experienced writer develops a sixth sense about the balance of his story and knows almost instinctively the right proportions of each to use.

SHOWING is also called dramatizing. Here we may think of our story as a stage set with all the props, and our characters as actors coming on to enact the scene. Here the reader looks at the drama we unfold before him and feels that he is really seeing this thing happen before his eyes.

This effect is obtained by writing in dramatic action. Let us look at some examples of narrative as contrasted with drama, telling as contrasted with showing:

(Narrative) My Aunt Bessie was a parsimonious person.

(Dramatic action) Auntie Bess brought a saucer of water.
She soaked the stamp until it came off in
her hand. She looked at it with fond satisfaction.

In the first example, we hear that Aunt Bess is parsimonious. In the second, we see her doing something that shows her as a saving economical soul. The reader sees it because of the pains she is taking with the stamp.

This same thing could also be shown through dialogue:

(Dialogue) "Soak that stamp off, child. I spoiled the
address on the card." Auntie brought in a
saucer of water. "Soak it off, do you hear?
We can't be wasting stamps."

Either dramatic action or dialogue may be used to show. A combination of them is also good.

Do you remember how Somerset Maugham, in Of Human Bondage, depicts the mean stinginess of Phillip's clergyman uncle by showing us how he offered the little boy the tops of his breakfast eggs?

It is better to show the character doing something mean and niggardly than to make a flat statement that he was stingy. The reader likes it

better because it flatters his reasoning powers. When he sees Aunt Bess soaking off one-cent stamps, saving string from raveled out flour sacks, and hoarding the rubber bands from the morning newspaper, he knows that this is a most economical old woman. Maybe she cuts the bars of toilet soap in half. Perhaps she lights her house with 25-watt bulbs and only keeps the one in the kitchen burning at night. All these things show that she is penurious, but if she is mean about it and her saving propensities make other people suffer, then the reader will label her as stingy.

A writer may make a flat statement:

John was a kind, compassionate man and a good neighbor.

Here we are told three things about John. It would be better to show them.

John strode up the path with Richy on his shoulder and Richy's tricycle in his hand. He set the little boy gently down on the verandah and called to me. "I brung your baby back, Ma'm. He was playin' down on the highway."

Now we see that John is kind because he was willing to leave his work and bring the little boy back to his mother. He is compassionate because he set the child down gently. If he had shown annoyance, this would not be true. He is a good neighbor because only good neighbors are thoughtful of other people and their children.

Instead of saying that a man is a thief, show him stealing. Instead of saying a boy is greedy, show him sneaking pocketfuls of food at a party. Instead of saying a woman is selfish, show her behaving in a selfish way.

When the teachers say "Show us, don't tell us" they are saying something sensible and important, and we should practice showing until we have mastered the skill of presenting our readers with a living picture.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT IS A SCENE?

A scene in a written story is not much different from the scene as played by actors on a stage.

In a story scene actors come on stage and play out a dramatic sequence which leaves the characters changed in some way. The story problem is often introduced in the opening scene. The unfolding plot is carried forward with mounting suspense by means of additional scenes, and the final climax is also a scene. The end of the tale is often a scene in which all story ends are tied.

The very word scene suggests that here is something to see, something to view, to look at. This must be true of all our story scenes.

WHAT A SCENE MUST HAVE

1. First of all, a scene must have characters. These characters must be introduced to the reader (unless he has met them in previous scenes). We should know the names and approximate ages of the characters, and something about them must be revealed in the scene. The physical appearance of the characters is the most superficial description we can give. We should study to portray our characters as personalities rather than photographs to be held up for viewing.
2. We should locate the scene. If it is a farmhouse, we should know it. If it is a city apartment or the interior of an air liner, we have a right to know. In some stories it is important to let the reader know the geographical location as well as the date of the month. In others, which have such universal appeal that the story could have happened almost anywhere, this is