



SECOND EDITION

Michael Rabiger

DEVELOPING STORY IDEAS

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DEVELOPING STORY IDEAS

Second Edition

Michael Rabiger



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DEVELOPING STORY IDEAS

In fond memory of Lois Deacon, who said,
“Nothing is real until I have written about it.”

Introduction

If you like writing but get frustrated by characters who refuse to come alive, plots that fizzle, or story ideas that all feel secondhand, this book will prove exhilarating and freeing. Using minimal jargon and speaking directly to you as a colleague, its advice and many practical assignments will help you generate a fund of your own story ideas—and have great pleasure doing it. Though addressed to prospective screenwriters, the book’s work is foundational and can lead just as easily to projects in prose fiction, theater, radio, or journalism.

The story development work all takes place in outline form, so critique and further work really bear fruit, for this is a workout manual in *ideation*—that is, in finding and developing the core ideas and the personal connections that underpin all good stories and lend them impact.

A book like this is necessary because telling stories—so natural and easy for the very young—gets more difficult as we grow up. We become self-conscious and self-critical. Academic education compounds the problem by herding us into large, competitive, and impersonal institutions. Most schooling concentrates on facts, objectivity, and rote memorization, and this makes self-exploration seem indulgent and irrelevant. But we come into possession of ourselves only if we connect—emotionally, imaginatively, and spiritually—with others. Humans have always done this through telling and listening to stories. Stories are the oxygen of civilization and the elixir of sanity and wisdom; we must both hear them and tell them if we are to survive and prosper.

My half-century of professional involvement with storytelling and storytellers has convinced me that each person is deeply marked by key experiences, and so each has moving stories to tell. Doing this well means first looking inward. In order to develop your creativity and individual “voice” you will need to access, value, and build upon what you carry within. This

book is about the midwifery that makes this happen. All the conceptual tools and assignments are simply explained through everyday analogies and a minimum of jargon. You will also learn something of a storyteller's capacity for acting and showmanship, for a successful screen author must be able to change roles at will from subjective to objective, from "pitching" ideas to listening or reacting as an audience member, critic, or analyst. There is curiously little in print as guidance through these vital parts of the writer's creative process.

Most people learn best through *making* something, so there are more than 50 hands-on assignments to get you working with observation, imagery, memory, and other resources. We begin with some fascinating self-assessment assignments. These help you draw a self-profile and decide provisionally what you alone have to say. Other assignments show how to exploit a great range of observational, pictorial, and written resources. You will use observations from immediate life to play a hilarious game of improvisation that exercises your intuition and helps strengthen your confidence. There are childhood and family-based assignments, others that involve oral or traditional story sources and others still that involve dreams. You will also practice adapting short stories and reality-based stories, and the final challenges are assignments using fiction and documentary. The assignments increase in length and complexity and call for you to control differing points of view.

The assignments integrate practice, theory, and discussion and ask you to use your "unfinished business"—meaning the sublimated personal agenda that we are apt to pursue only at an unconscious level. Through hands-on work, an emphasis on self-actualization, and through working (if possible) in a learning community, you can expect to develop a significant body of work and form the kind of partnerships that make creating anything in the arts so gratifying and life enhancing.

With each creative assignment comes a sampling of student work. From my discussions you see how one employs the concepts, attitudes, and respectful language of critical response, and how dramatic principles explained earlier emerge in context. Where it is useful, each chapter ends with a select bibliography headed "Going Farther."

In its final chapters the book demonstrates story editing, how to use the dramatic conventions to strengthen your work, and how to set about expanding an outline into a full-length work of fiction or nonfiction. Examples and guidelines help you turn your favorite outlines into a short story, novel, stage play, or cinema screenplay.

This new edition contains important additional material. Chapters 7–10 lay out a "tool kit" of concepts that you can use to assess any part of any story in any medium. Included are methods to:

- Handle the different roles you play while taking part in developing a story; that is, when you are by turns an author, story editor, presenter, audience member, or critic.

- Develop a character and understand the difference between stereotypes and archetypes, as well as between “flat” and “round” characters.
- Discriminate between the component parts of a scene.
- Break a complex work into a functional, three-act structure.
- Assess and graph a scene or a complete work and represent its varying intensity as a dramatic arc.
- Analyze any story in any form for its effectiveness, meaning, and purpose.
- Decide how to handle a story’s point(s) of view most effectively.

Chapter 15 contains a new feature that many people will find invaluable—a comprehensive strategy for breaking down a literary work, analyzing its contents, and evaluating it for adaptation to the screen. Many good people contributed to this book. I am indebted to the New York University Film Department faculty for their discussions and friendship, in particular Lora Hays, George Stoney, Ken Dancyger, Marketa Kimbrell, and Nick Tanis. I must also thank Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, who kindly invited me to NYU in the first place for a wonderful year of teaching.

I owe much gratitude to my NYU students, who generously permitted me to reproduce their writing. Their hard work and infectious enthusiasm made our classes a joy, and without them there would literally be no book. They came from France, Korea, Norway, Mexico, Britain, Canada, and of course the United States. Thank you Michelle Arno, Bryan Beasley, Leah Cho, Chris Darnley, Paul Flanagan, Angela Galean, Michael Hanttula, Margaret Harris, Kundong Lee, Louis Leterrier, Amanda McCormick, Alex Meilleur, Cynthia Merwath, Tatsuyo Ohno, Joy Park, Peter Riley, Trish Rosen, Vilka Tzouras, Sharmaine Webb, and Julie Werenskiold.

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My toughest critic is my wife, Nancy Mattei. I offer her my heartfelt appreciation for her contributions to my work and for putting up so gracefully with a writer’s antisocial work habits.

Michael Rabiger
Chicago, 2005

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PART I

OVERVIEW

This Book, Its Goals, and Getting Started

This book, about discovering and developing deeply felt ideas for stories, means to take you enjoyably through the writer's creative process so you can generate first-rate story ideas of your own. It will show how the roots of stories are to be found within, and help you to work from the inside outwards.

You can use the book by yourself and work through the assignments in your own way. Particularly in the earlier chapters, multiple assignments permit alternative focuses, and you should not hesitate to choose whatever you find most attractive.

To be original in what you create asks that you take risks, create actively and repeatedly, and create not in isolation but *with and for* other people. The book will show you how to engage others as your audience and use their reactions as the stepping-stones to a finer understanding. If you intend facilitating a group or teaching with this book, consult its website for further notes and help (www.focalpress.com). There you will find a friendly discussion of the teaching process as well as extensive suggestions for making a plan or syllabus.

The assignments in this book offer:

- An approach compatible with radio, journalism, television, literary fiction, and theater as well as the cinema.
- Work geared to anyone seeking to create more and better stories.
- Ways to value and make use of your formative experience.
- Private self-assessment exercises to help you form a working notion of your artistic identity.
- Clear and graphic descriptions of dramaturgical tools and terminology. These often appear in a sidebar (see example).

- A range of ways to prime the creative process so you never need suffer from writer's block.
- Access to personal and communal resources that any writer can draw on.
- Short writing assignments concentrating on essence, not length or polished form.
- An egalitarian approach to fiction and nonfiction that recognizes the presence of each in the other.
- Writing samples and accompanying critique to demonstrate dramatic analysis.
- Ways to work with others instead of compete with them.
- Ways to give and take constructive critique.
- Ways to expand your favorite outlines into short story, novel, play, or cinema screenplay.

*Sidebar*s like this appear throughout the book. Sometimes they contain pertinent advice or instructions, but mostly they define terms or concepts. Key words are italicized in the sidebar, and often in the accompanying text too. Use the index at any time to locate whatever you need.

If you are part of a class or writing collaboration, you can expect:

- Your partner, group leader, or teacher to adapt the book to his or her preferences and experience.
- To get valuable experience from presenting your ideas to peers as a group.
- To participate in a nonjudgmental community where theory, practice, and critique take place in an atmosphere of supportive friendship and enthusiasm.
- To get to know the other group members unusually well and to become known and valued by them.
- To find a partner or partners that you will want to write with, perhaps professionally.

PLAYING ROLES

Working as an author is intriguing because you have to adopt different roles. With each you use different skills and disciplines:

- **Author.** This is the identity that generates the raw material and demands that you be instinctive, intuitive, and anarchic. Whatever you see, hear, or imagine while you are writing goes down on paper without a second thought. You follow no procedure except what your imagination demands.

- **Analyst.** Change to this role whenever you review written material, whether your own, or someone else's. Like a documentary film editor confronting a great mass of raw footage captured on the run, you analyze and categorize the materials, then structure them into the linearity of a story. When you are story editing, help is always available from the storehouse of dramatic and storytelling traditions and principles.
- **Presenter.** You assume a showman identity when you "pitch" a story idea, no matter whether your audience is one person or a roomful. This personality, however, has two modes—active and receptive.

Pitching a story means making a 3- to 5-minute oral presentation that enables the listener(s) to envisage the characters, events, and purpose of the tale. Pitches are common in Hollywood, and also at festivals and conferences where judges or other groups must decide whose project merits support.

 - **Active Mode:** While telling the story you try to captivate your audience by imagining they are the first audience for your film (novel, play, short story, poem, etc.). From their facial and physical reactions you will quickly sense how effective your story is, moment to moment. Their presence produces strong convictions about where the story is working and where it needs changes and development. This, of course is, how comedians learn their craft.
 - **Receptive Mode:** After the pitch, listen attentively to what your audience can tell you. It is vital not to argue or explain. Simply ask open-ended questions and absorb from your masters, the audience. If you are pitching not as the story's author but as, say, its producer, it is vital to note down everything the audience says for the author to consider.
- **Audience/Critic.**
 - **Audience.** You adopt this attentive, respectful, layman identity whenever someone presents their work. Keep an open mind, and remember what feelings, thoughts, and reactions the work provoked in you so you can describe them faithfully back to the author.
 - **Critic.** Whenever you set out to communicate a work's effect, you become a critic offering constructive feedback. Start with what you found effective, and then respectfully suggest what you think needs change or development. Good critics avoid intellectualizing. They address what the storyteller is trying to accomplish through the story, never how they would have handled the idea themselves.

The challenge is to keep these roles separate. When you are writing in Author mode, your Analyst persona will try to rise up, instruct, and generally inhibit you. Or when your pitch comes under critique, the Author and Analyst in you will get up on their hind legs to defend it. These impulses you must master or you won't be able to take anything in. Becoming professional means keeping to the appropriate role, and this takes practice and self-awareness. You'll get a real sense of accomplishment once you can switch cleanly between them.

YOU AND YOUR RESOURCES

Novice writers often feel that nothing worth writing about has really happened to them. This leaves them feeling inadequate to develop story ideas, plots, or story structures. The temptation is to emulate the style of an admired writer or director, and to work from the outside inward. I believe, however, that once you reach your teens you have already seen at least a minor version of almost everything that life can offer. Directly or indirectly you have experienced victory, defeat, love, hate, being thrown out of Eden, death—everything. So what a young person lacks is not experience, but knowing how to recognize, value, and shape it. A key lies in what Herman Melville called “the shock of recognition,” and what Thomas Hardy called “moments of vision.” Both authors mean those instants of piercing clarity when a special truth or meaning rises up to hit you between the eyes. This book shows you where to look for such insights and what to do with them once you find them. They are the keys to the multitude of moving and effective stories that you assuredly carry within. Priming the pump is this book's purpose.

WHY WE WORK IN OUTLINE FORM

Everything you write will be in scene outline form. This is an ideal development form because it concentrates on visualizing action and elaborating the plot, and leaves dialogue and other detail for a later stage. Changes are easily made to an outline, and improvements show up quickly and clearly.

A story in outline is also amenable to being “pitched,” that is, presented in short oral form. In audience-oriented media like theater and film, audience reactions to nascent ideas are a morale booster and an important reality check.

Writing in outline keeps your basic ideas compact and everything that matters remains visible and handy for adjustment. Once several audiences say the outline feels right and complete, it will be a straightforward matter to expand it into a screenplay, short story, or other narrative form.

IDEATION AND ORIGINALITY

All accomplished authors seem to agree that there is but one prerequisite for becoming a writer, and that is to keep writing, no matter what. Being original does not mean going where no man hath trod but instead working persistently in your chosen area until you reach gold. This takes taste and determined work, for driving an idea to greater depths means refusing to accept what's only so-so. Everybody's early ideas are banal and similar, and most people make the mistake of hurrying on to write their "finished" version far too soon. By then, trying to improve the basic *ideation* is like trying to alter the steelwork after the building's gone up.

Ideation is the process of finding and developing the ideas that underpin a creative endeavor. Like a building's foundation, a good story idea must be singularly appropriate for what it must support.

You can always test how far you have come by simply pitching the latest version to anyone who'll listen. You'll know instinctively during your performance how much work remains from how you feel as well as from how your audience reacts. I know this sounds like magical thinking, but you'll know what I mean when you try it.

IDENTIFYING WITH THE MAIN CHARACTER

Many novice writers identify with their protagonist, who just happens to share their age, gender, and outlook. They often write from within their protagonist's thoughts, feelings, and outlook. This works fine for literature, but not for cinema. The eyes and ears of film recording are those of an onlooker who can never enter another person's mind or know what they think or feel. The onlooker must *interpret* what each character feels and wants *from what they do or say*.

If you think about it, this is just like life; for we never enter another's reality except by imaginatively exercising our powers of observation. Writing for the screen is therefore an excellent discipline for any writer wanting to escape the egocentricity we bring along from early life when the world revolved around ourselves.

JUMP-STARTING THE IMAGINATION

Imagination, like an old car, does not work well from a cold start. It prefers getting a jump-start from examples and associations. From the early assignments you will see how writing flows naturally from observing life and