

Beginner's Guide to Writing: The Mistakes Every Novice Makes



When I read anything—from letters of family and friends to the works of John Clifford Mortimer to the plays of William Shakespeare—I read with a critical eye. Part of my mind is constantly editing the lines, mentally evaluating the paragraphs, and revising and correcting. I pick apart the literary structure, seeking to determine what works and what does not. From these exercises, I have learned to spot a new writer in seconds. Even the novice's thirst for the passion of writing cannot disguise the infantile mistakes.

The mistakes are always the same. They go to the heart of every work of fiction. The new writer wonders how to get started. That is not the fundamental hurdle. A writer can always draw on life experience as a springboard to write. No, the mistakes arise in not *what* to write, but *how* to write it. The mistakes arise not in *how to find a topic*, but in the *exposed guts of the written word*.

A new writer can read a hundred books on writing, but the presented material will always be the same. This duplication makes sense since every new writer makes the same mistakes. Instead of merely pointing you to the best writing primers, this article will summarize the material, using Robert Rodat's acclaimed screenplay, *The Patriot* as a point of reference and example.

After studying this article, you should review your work under a magnifying glass, putting yourself in the shoes of a relentless detective. As Hercule Poirot, inspect your work from different lines of sight.

- ▶▶ Do a tight shot of word usage, grammar, and sentence structure.
- ▶▶ Do a medium shot of character, plot, and point of view.
- ▶▶ Do an overhead shot of pacing and tempo, of story hook, hub, and resolution.

Next, inspect your work from different angles, as Poirot would examine the clues of a murder mystery. Like Poirot, formulate challenges, your own twelve labors. At the conclusion, retire your work with pride by submitting it for publication.

A final introductory note: for those who have not seen *The Patriot*, you may want to rent a copy of the DVD or at least read an editorial review. Frankly, unless you have a working knowledge of the screenplay, this article will not be of much use.

Gone are the days when a writer can indulge herself with a leisurely beginning. In an age in which we receive our news in 15-second sound bites, stories must capture the reader's interest in the very first paragraph. Unfortunately, the new writer fails to understand this "hook" concept. Instead of plopping the reader in the middle of the action from the first line, reserving the back-story for later, the new writer squanders pages in explanatory material.

The new writer must remember that she need not tell her story all at one time. The better approach is to initially hook the reader and to then draw out the details over the breadth of the work. Rodat employs this technique on two levels in the opening scenes of *The Patriot*.

After the credits roll, Rodat presents the viewer with a mystery. The protagonist, Benjamin Martin, is intently engaged in some activity, the purpose of which is unclear. The viewer is intrigued; his curiosity is piqued. At the same time, the mail arrives. The children are excited, and by extension, so is the viewer. Something is about to happen. Notice how, for both of these hooks, Rodat delays satisfying the viewer's curiosity. Only after a series of teasing scenes does he let the viewer in on what is happening: (a) that Martin has again failed to build a rocking chair; and (b) that there is talk of war. Notice also that as soon as this mystery is resolved, Rodat presents the viewer with two new ones: (a) what will be the outcome of the disagreement between father and son; and (b) how the coming war will effect Martin and his family.

Besides serving as a hook, the rocking chair scene also serves another purpose. It provides the viewer with an insight into the Martin character. From the scene, the viewer learns that Martin is persistent (from his failed but repeated attempts to build a rocker), and that he is volatile (from his explosive temper when the rocker breaks). The viewer also learns that Martin is aware of his volatility and is sorry for it. Thus, the scene humanizes Martin. Martin is not perfect. Characters must not be perfect. Creating unflawed characters is a novice writer's mistake. Flawed characters create conflict. Conflict creates interest. Interest creates the desire to read more.

After this brief prologue, Rodat jumps into the paramount conflict that will span the entire story. Notice that Rodat does not rush to resolve this conflict (i.e., Martin does not immediately go off to war). Notice too how he integrates minor disputes as the story unfolds and before reaching the paramount conflict.

- ▶▶ Rodat creates tension over whether to raise a levy in support of the war.
- ▶▶ Rodat emphasizes the friction between Martin and his neighbors who favor war, especially by having one rebel supporter imply that Martin is a coward.
- ▶▶ Rodat renews the clash between Martin and his son, Gabriel, who disobeys his father to enlist.
- ▶▶ Rodat highlights Martin's turmoil, showing him torn between his private fear of his volatile nature and his public desire to support independence.

Not only does Rodat include these several minor, intervening conflicts, he *sustains* the conflict. No crisis is resolved without another arising, each one more formidable than the last. Similarly, the novice writer must sustain conflict in her writing. She can accomplish this—as Rodat

accomplishes it in *The Patriot*—by incorporating plot twists, by having the hero fight against the odds, by including challenges for the hero to overcome.

- ▶▶ Rodat includes a plot twist when Martin’s guerrilla tactics used against him. When Martin suffers this defeat, the rebel cause appears hopeless.
- ▶▶ Rodat underscores that the English forces outman and outgun Martin’s motley militia. Hence, Martin and his men fight against the odds, and no one expects them to win against the trained, disciplined soldiers serving under General Cornwallis.
- ▶▶ Rodat gives Martin a series of challenges, culminating in the question of whether Martin will continue to fight after the death of his son. Indeed, Rodat provides tests for Martin at every opportunity. Can Martin overcome his nemesis fears? Can he obtain provisions for his men? Can he rouse his men to continue to fight after their homes and families are threatened?

An example in which Rodat fails to provide conflict is a valuable lesson to the new writer. The romance between Martin and his sister-in-law, Charlotte, is boring because there is no conflict. She says yes and amen to everything that he does. He says yes and amen to everything that she does. While Rodat tantalizes the viewer with the subplot that Martin may have transferred his love for his dead wife to her sister, he never fleshes this subplot out and too quickly resolves it. The result is the weak writing that the novice writer should not emulate.

The courtship between Gabriel and Anne is also boring. Although their new love ends tragically, there is still no tension. Hence, there is no conflict. Imagine how much stronger this subplot would have been if Anne had been opposed to Gabriel’s enlistment. Instead of “the lovers renew their acquaintance, they marry, she dies,” Rodat could have explored Gabriel’s temptation to forsake the cause for the love of his life. Such an exploration would have created confrontations not only between Gabriel and Anne but also between Gabriel and Martin and paralleled Martin’s uncertainties about his role in the war for independence.

Thus far, I have emphasized that the novice writer fails to create conflict—sustained conflict—in her writing. I have yet to explain how to construct such sustained conflict.

While sustaining conflict for the length of a 400-page manuscript is not easy, it is not impossible either. Careful plot pacing (a detailed outline with charted plot points is a must) is one way. I find that using plot to construct sustained conflict, however, is more difficult than using character. Since *The Patriot* is essentially a simple revenge plot, Rodat seems to concur. He clearly uses the Martin and Tavington characters to create sustained conflict.

Martin and Tavington are equals. Both are colonels. Both are leaders of elite fighting forces. Both use unconventional tactics to achieve victory. Both are ruthless. Most importantly, both want something. Martin wants to put aside violence and to raise his family in peace. Tavington

wants to restore his family honor and family fortune by any means necessary. Because Rodat makes these two characters so alike, he automatically creates tension, especially since Martin's wants clash with Tavington's wants.

When a new writer drafts his characters, he should similarly give his protagonist and his antagonist antithetical wants. He should then construct the plot and subplots so that both characters have obstacles that hinder these wants—obstacles with increasing levels of difficulty. The last obstacle, the most difficult one, generates the climax and results in the end of the story.

Rodat follows this plot rule, giving Martin a series of minor obstacles.

- ▶▶ Rodat has Martin question the use of violence to achieve independence.
- ▶▶ Rodat places new stress on Martin's struggle to protect his children when his younger son wants to enlist.
- ▶▶ Rodat highlights Martin's mortal dilemma over the rules of war.
- ▶▶ Rodat has Martin struggle to maintain a disciplined fighting force and to keep his men together once Tavington attacks their homes and families.

Martin must overcome each of these obstacles—doing so creates conflict—until achieving his ultimate goal: revenge on Tavington for the murder of his sons and the destruction of his home. Notice that Rodat obeys the rule that the climax is always played out between the hero and the villain, between the protagonist and the antagonist, between the two primary characters. The revenge attempt by Gabriel (a secondary character) must fail. Otherwise, the story would not satisfy. After Tavington's mistreatment of Martin and his children and after Tavington's barbaric murder of the helpless townspeople, the viewer wants to see Martin make him pay.

In plotting obstacles, the new writer should be mindful of the literary device of the “power of the three's.” Martin and Tavington face each other twice before their final encounter. Their first meeting at Martin's plantation sets up the revenge motif. Their second meeting at the loyalist's headquarters intensifies their hatred, especially when Tavington taunts Martin about the murder of his younger son. Their third and final meeting takes place within the context of the Battle of Cowpens where they fight to the death. Notice how Martin and Tavington could have met in the King's Highway scene. Although their men fought, Rodat did not permit Martin and Tavington to confront each other for such a fourth meeting would have destroyed the power of the three's.

The new writer litters her work with uninteresting characters. Readers are not interested in dull, everyday people. Think of the great heroes and villains of literature: Othello, Michael Corleone, Scarlet O'Hara, Dracula. These characters exude drama. Rodat follows this rule by presenting not one but two larger-than-life characters, Martin *and* Tavington.

Martin is a prosperous landowner, respected and liked, the hero of the Wilderness Campaign. He is the unquestioned leader of men, the colonel of the courageous militiamen. He commits an act of power that few men could have accomplished by defeating a squadron of His Majesty's finest soldiers. His bravery earns him the sobriquet of The Ghost, and he becomes a colonial Robin Hood. Although he appears to be nothing more a rustic, he goes toe-to-toe in the intricate rules of war with General Cornwallis and, through trickery and deceit, prevails. This character is interesting, and the viewer is engaged—indeed, caught up—in the drama of his life.

A larger-than-life hero must be pitted against a larger-than-life villain. William Tavington is such a villain. From the moment of his appearance as colonel of the feared dragoons, Rodat establishes this character as the greatest threat to everything that Martin holds dear. Although Tavington knows that Martin is not a rebel (Martin gives medical care to both sides), he still orders the torching of Martin's home. He drags off Martin's son to be shot as a spy in violation of the rules of war. In the scuffle that follows, Tavington kills Martin's younger son, Thomas, then sneers at the boy's rashness. When Martin eludes capture and inflicts a series of stinging victories, Tavington's disdain turns to hatred. He makes the killing of Martin's children his private vendetta.

Rodat's Tavington is a villain, but he is not a stock villain. The Tavington character has depth and dimension, depth and dimension that a new writer should strive for when creating characters. Tavington is evil, yes, but he is also vulnerable. He is the heir to a ruined estate, the scion to a family without esteem, forced to advance through his own devices. He is under the thumb of the prideful Cornwallis, who reprimands him for brutality and who stands in the way of advancement. Despite his savage bravo, Tavington has doubts about the morality of his actions. In the end, he questions who is the better man.

The new writer often fails to tell a story. While journal writing may be complete without change, a novel is not complete without some type of transformation. This change can be in the personality of the protagonist or in the journey that the protagonist undertakes. For the Martin character, Rodat includes both. Martin is changed by his internal conflict (his fears that his past sins will be visited upon his children) and by his external conflict (the forces of war which he cannot control). Martin is also changed by his journey. Although he joins the rebels to protect Gabriel and to avenge the death of his younger son, he forsakes this journey in the climatic battle with Tavington. When faced with the choice of hunting Tavington down or preventing the retreat, Martin chooses the latter. He becomes fully committed to the war for independence, putting that goal before his quest for revenge. In the end, he comes full circle to embrace his sons' ideals.

In telling her story, the novice writer often neglects to employ literary devices to flesh out the action. The new writer must show—not tell—and show using simile, metaphor, symbolism, foreshadowing, plot twist, and even hyperbole.

- ▶▶ Rodat uses simile and the extended metaphor of *The Ghost and The Butcher* to emphasize Martin's and Tavington's individual acts of power.
- ▶▶ Rodat uses the symbolism of the toy soldiers. The toys belonged to Martin's younger son, Thomas. For Thomas, war is a game; it is make-believe and dress-up. Martin explicitly rejects this idea when he melts the toys for use as shot. Martin's actions also symbolize his ruthlessness and his resolve to avenge Thomas's death.
- ▶▶ Rodat uses foreshadowing in the opening scenes by having Martin brood: "I have long feared that my sins would return to visit me and the cost is more than I can bear" and to repeat this foreshadowing at his vigil for Gabriel. Rodat uses foreshadowing again by dropping hints about Martin's conduct during the Wilderness Campaign.
- ▶▶ Rodat uses the plot twist of turning the tables on Martin. To the surprise of the viewer, Tavington exploits Martin's ambush trick. Rodat uses another plot twist when he permits the viewer to believe that Gabriel will kill Tavington only for Tavington to kill Gabriel instead.
- ▶▶ Rodat uses hyperbole to imply that Martin and his men are such savages that they would eat Cornwallis's Great Danes. Martin teases Gabriel with his deadpan "a dog is a fine meal." This hyperbole adds depth to the Martin character, giving him a brief lightheartedness.

Lastly, the new writer fails to research. Regardless of the nature of the writing, facts must be checked. The writing must reflect the speech, dress, and technology of the era. Although Rodat's *The Patriot* is not strictly accurate—it is not a documentary—he does give the viewer a flavor of the colonial south. However, several historical errors detract from the authenticity of his work.

- ▶▶ Rodat sanitizes slavery. South Carolina in the 1700's was the hub for both the Indian and the African slave trade. The absence of slave blocks, slave marches, and slave posts in the Charlestown scenes is simply wrong. Furthermore, Martin could not operate his plantation without slave labor, and he would not have such an enlightened view of the equality of the races. Martin is, after all, very much an eighteen-century man.
- ▶▶ Rodat falls prey to the noble slave syndrome. His character, Occam, is the stereotypical, one-dimensional "Tom" servant, meekly enduring his unfair treatment at the hands of the whites. Occam lacks even a spark of rebellion. Yet, South Carolina was the site of numerous slave uprisings, and southern

planters lived in constant fear that the slave revolts of the Caribbean would spread to their shores.

- ▶▶ Rodat ignores Native Americans. With the exception of mentioning the savagery against the Cherokee during the Wilderness Campaign, the great Indian nations of the south are nonexistent. Moreover, people of tri-racial (African, Indian, and European) descent were common in colonial South Carolina, but Rodat does not include one such character.
- ▶▶ Rodat misrepresents the status of women. Paternalism reigned in the colonial south. Women were seen, not heard; but Rodat has Anne chastise the male members of the congregation for their unwillingness to fight. Her speech is unlikely since women, especially young ladies, in the 1770's were rarely allowed to speak in church, and they certainly would not publicly rebuke their elders.

A new writer can learn from Rodat's mistakes. If the work is a period piece, the writer must be prepared to *damn* political correctness and to present the era in all its ugliness. If the period is South Carolina in 1776, then black, Native American, and female characters must be treated in fiction as they were treated in reality: as inferiors, as savages, as second-class persons.

Now that you know the mistakes to avoid, go back and review your work. Become Hercule Poirot. Formulate your challenges. Revise your work. And *succeed!* ■