THE WRITER'S
EVERYTHING

Editing
Things To Look Out For
Part Two

From The Editor

QJ MARTIN

I've never felt so good about my writing as I do right now. Nearly a half dozen of my novel ideas are coming together in ways I never expected. One, which I adore, will also unapologetically break my heart, as it's the story of an abused puppy told from his naive, unreliable perspective.

Queue the tears.

I'm also hard at work on the creation of my ultimate character development book, *If So, Why*, which was successfully funded nearly two weeks ago now. I'm going to have to keep a solid schedule to get it ready for its June release, but I'm confident that I can do it.

What projects are you undertaking this year? How far have you gotten in them already, and how confident are you in their success? Feel free to share your progress with me on Twitter.

The Writer's Everything is released as a free bi-weekly PDF download. If you'd like it sent directly to your inbox every other Monday, then you can go to https://qjmartin.org/newsletter/ and sign up there to receive it. Be sure to check your junk folder in case the newsletter is accidentally filtered out of your inbox.

If you would like to support *The Writer's Everything*, as well as my other literary endeavors, be sure that I will never turn down donations. You can pledge your patronage at https://patreon.com/qjmartin/.

Until next time,

QJ

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WEEKLY

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Developing Your Character

Basic Information > School

QJ MARTIN

How does he get to school?

The methods available for a character to travel to school are many and varied, and which one he uses will usually depend on the wealth of his family and his social status. Some students are able to afford their own vehicles, or even their own drivers, while others must hitch rides from family or friends, ride the bus or their bike to school, or simply walk. In *Transformers*, Sam Witwicky is very excited when his father tells him that he's going to be able to buy his own car, and he uses the vehicles to take himself to school while simultaneously showing off for the other students. In *Spider-Man*, Peter Parker has to take the bus to school because of his family's poor economic standing, while MJ Watson has friends that offer to drive her to school, and Harry Osborn has his own personal driver that drops him off.

What are his grades like?

Some students may put a great deal of effort into their schoolwork and thus earn good grades, while other students may have extremely low grades, either because of learning impairments, a lack of motivation, or peer pressure. In *Family Guy*, Chris Griffin receives very low grades in one class, earning himself a failing grade along with the disapproval of his English teacher, Mrs. Lockhart. In the *Harry Potter* series, Hermione Grander consistently receives exceptional grades at school, earning herself the approval of most of the staff, as well as ten "Outstanding's" and one "Exceeds Expectations" in her OWL exams.

What is his favorite class?

Nearly every student who attends school, even the underachievers, tend to have one class that they hold above all the others, even if it is because of a lack of homework, such as in the case of Physical Education, or because of a lack of structured work altogether, such as in the case of Study Hall. In *I Am Number Four*, Sarah Heart loves photography, and thus chooses to work on the school newspaper, providing pictures for it.

What class does he hate?

Nearly every student, no matter how motivated they may be to succeed academically, has at least one class that they absolutely hate, whether it's because it requires skills they do not possess, it doesn't appeal to them intellectually, or they do not like the teacher and/or students in the class. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione Grander hates the class of Divination, in spite of her status as a book worm, and even goes so far as to declare it to be a "load of rubbish."

Editing—Things To Look Out For, Part Two

QJ MARTIN

Finishing the first draft of your novel is an absolutely enormous accomplishment. If you've ever written the final paragraphs of your 100,000 word manuscript, bookending it all with "The End," then you have the right to be proud. Maybe even let yourself feel a little cocky. After all, you're going to need all the encouragement and energy you can muster to push yourself through the next step.

If you know what this step is already, then you're more than likely dreading the following word: editing. As awesome as it is to finish a first draft, it's only half the battle. Oh, who am I kidding? It's a lot less than half.

As much as people dread it, however, the editing process is an absolute necessity for any first draft. It's the time when you arduously refine your writing again and again and again until what remains is a sparkling, perfectly cut gem.

The problem is that in our writing culture, we've been trained to fully embrace the creative process, to develop stories with twists and explosions and first kisses. Editing, unfortunately, is an entirely different process, and it requires an entirely different way of looking at your work.

So what should your objective be when editing your novel? Actually, there are many different things that you should keep firmly in mind when editing, so many that I've divided them into two categories.

The first, which was covered in the previous release of *The Writer's Everything,* focused on addressing the small details. Specifically, it discussed the need to tie up or eliminate loose ends and make sure that you're maintaining a consistent pace that is proper for your genre. In this article, we're going to be addressing two big-picture goals that you need to address when editing.

Of course, there's more to editing a novel than these four things. But writing a novel is like drawing a portrait. You start off with a quick, lightly penciled outline. Your next step should be, not shading the upper lip and drawing each strand of hair, but rather fleshing out your quick sketch with more details. You have to make sure that your "drawing" is taking the right shape, and once it's in the form you want it, then you can address the myriad of other objectives, such as fact checking, grammatical errors, and typos.

Unrealistic Character Motivations

One of the most important things we have to address when editing is character motivations. Characters are the driving force of your novel. Their decisions and actions are the reason you have a plot. Characters are also what connects your readers with your stories. We may not have first-hand knowledge of wizardry, but we may know what it's like to try to live up to the expectations of others, or fill the shoes that were left behind by our parents. We may not have first-hand experience in space dog-fights, but we may know what it's like to aspire to a greater, more meaningful life.

That's why it's so important to have solid character motivations. If your characters are unmotivated, then your readers aren't going to connect with them. They're not going to care whether he can save his job, his marriage, or the orphanage if he doesn't have the slightest interest in achieving those goals.

We have to make it clear what our characters want and why they want it. We have to understand what's most important to them, and once we do, then we're invested. When Luke Skywalker's aunt and uncle were killed in *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, we already knew that he dreamed of leaving Tatooine behind and becoming 'a Jedi like his father.' Because of that, we're eager to see what he does next in the pursuit of his goals.

On the other hand, when Hester Shaw attempts to assassinate Thaddeus Valentine in *Mortal Engines*, it's utterly meaningless to us. We don't know what her beef with him is, why she wants him dead, or what she will accomplish by killing him. We have no reason to root for her to either succeed or to fail.

Writing Definitions

Fantasy

Fantasy is a literary genre in which the story is set in a fictional universe, usually inspired by mythology and folklore, and often including supernatural or magical elements.

Epic/High Fantasy

High fantasy is a sub-genre of fantasy in which the story takes place in an imaginary, secondary world, and the themes and plot are often of an epic and complex nature.

Hard Fantasy

Hard fantasy is a sub-genre of fantasy that is not easily definable in a clear-cut way, but generally refers to stories that strive for realism, with clear, scientific explanations for their magic systems.

Historical Fantasy

Historical fantasy is a sub-genre of fantasy in which the story either takes place in an alternative version of our world, or in a secondary world which closely mirrors our own historical culture and society.

Low Fantasy

Low fantasy is a sub-genre of fantasy that takes place in our normal world, rather than a secondary world, where everything remains the same save the inclusion of magical elements

Urban Fantasy

Urban fantasy is a sub-genre of fantasy in which the story involves the inclusion of supernatural elements in an urban society. It may be set in our normal world, or in a secondary world that closely mirrors our own.

Writing Concepts

Primary Characters

Primary characters are characters who have major roles in the story. Primary characters are not just limited to the point-of-view (POV) characters, the main character, and the hero. Primary characters can include any protagonists, antagonists, or other characters that have a major effect on the plot of the story.

For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is the hero. Samwise and Gandalf are support characters who help him on his journey. And Saruman is the antagonist. All four of these individuals, however, are primary characters. Frodo is a major POV character. Samwise has a constant presence in the story, supporting Frodo and helping him to make good decisions. Gandalf has major effect on the plot of the story throughout the trilogy, starting Frodo off on his journey. And Saruman is the primary antagonist for the first two books, as well as an occasional POV character in the film adaptations.

Ensemble stories will have a large number of primary characters, while other stories may have relatively few. You can usually plan on having at least three, the main character, the side-kick, and the antagonist. For example, in *Nightcrawler*, Louis Bloom is the main character, Rick is the side-kick, and Nina is the antagonist. In *Z For Zachariah*, Loomis is the main character, Ann Burden is the side-kick, and Caleb is the antagonist. On the other hand, in *Adrift*, there are only two primary characters. Tami Oldham is the protagonist and Richard Sharp is the side-kick, and the inclement weather takes on the role of antagonist in the story.

Even more egregious are the instances where a character performs an action without having any real reason whatsoever. In such cases, the reason is transferred from the character's motivation to the author's motivation. They did it because the story needed them to do it.

Why did Mr. Freeze tell Batman that he'd 'kill him next time' when he had him in his clutches and could have easily ended his life then and there? Because then the story wouldn't happen.

All authors need to make sure that their characters are properly motivated, and that their motivations make sense. More experienced authors discover ways to weave character motivation into the story so that they are intrinsically linked. As you learn to pay attention to character motivations and adjust them as needed, you'll find that your novel instantly becomes more compelling and interesting.

Identifying The Theme

The second big-picture objective that we need to address when editing is theme. Now, I know, I know. "Theme" may be a five-letter word, but to many authors it might as well be one short.

It's too complex. No, not just that. It's too complicated. It's needlessly complicated. You don't want to have to think about the themes in your novel when you could be focusing on more compelling things, like adding in exciting action sequences and killer plot twists.

Just as with character motivation, however, you'll find that theme connects our readers to the story. Theme resonates with them, and having a solid theme developed is a sure way to keep them interested.

A word of caution, though, is in order.

Developing your theme is not synonymous with adding a moral to your story, and it certainly is not the same as preaching to your audience. Your theme is the topic that your story focuses on. That doesn't mean that by addressing theme, your characters have to make it clear what's right and what's wrong. In fact, more experienced writers are able to skillfully weave theme throughout their stories.

While Jean Valjean is a slave to his past crimes in *Les Misérables*, Inspector Javert is a slave to the law, Fantine is a slave to poverty, and Cosette is a slave to society. Jean Valjean attempts to break away from his past and gain freedom in a new life. Inspector Javert contemplates his responsibility to uphold the law, and in the end, he can't break free from his moral obligations. Fantine is unable to gain freedom from her impoverished life, yet she wins said freedom for her daughter Cosette. Cosette, meanwhile, feels locked in place by the expectations of society, and struggles to break free from her responsibilities and enjoy a relatively carefree life with Marius Pontmercy.

Of course, readers can discover their own themes in the pages of a novel. They can extract their own meaning and significance from your story. Does that mean that we don't have to worry about theme ourselves?

Not at all.

While you may accidentally stumble upon certain themes while writing your novel, the best themes are planned out and developed just as well as the plot and the character motivations are. After all, the more work you put into developing the themes of your work, the more there will be for your readers to discover.

Don't Be Afraid

When it comes to editing your novel, don't feel like you're obligated to suffer through it. And definitely don't be afraid of the process. With just a few simple steps, and a little perseverance, you can craft your simple first draft into a fantastic, deeply developed second draft. So get to it and enjoy the journey.

The Good Side of Subverting Expectations

QJ MARTIN

A more and more common creative choice for story-tellers in our modern age is the practice of subverting expectations. What that means is that the audience goes into your story expecting one thing, and what you give them is something different.

The problem with this habit is that it is quickly overshadowing the quality choices that would make for better storytelling and more fulfilling arcs. In *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens*, for example, we are introduced to Rey, and one pivotal question is raised. Who are her parents? In the sequel, *Star Wars VIII: The Last Jedi*, Rian Johnson has went on record as saying that he wanted to provide the most shocking answer possible, one that no one would have seen coming. Her parents were nobody.

The problem isn't that her parents have to be major players in this galactic saga. The problem is that the first movie basically straight-up told us that the identity of her parents matters, and that we should postulate on who they might be.

In like manner, *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones* shattered expectations by making it so that any character, whether top billed or not, could die at any time. This was shocking and effective at first, yet now has become just as worthy of the title of trope as the original habit of having the main characters survive everything.

I've already talked at length in a previous article about the negatives of subverting expectations (Issue #005), so I'm not going to continue expressing my frustrations with this habit that so many writers have picked up. However, it's surprisingly not all bad when it comes to the act of subverting expectations. Every so often there is a piece of storytelling that not only does a passable job at it, but succeeds with flying colors.

How is it that these writers are able to pull this off when so many others have failed?

The key to subverting expectations successfully is that the unexpected events you include must be of greater entertainment value than what those they expect.

Happy Death Day is one example of a movie that subverts expectations and turns out all the better for it. In it, Tree Gelbman is forced to repeat the same day over and over, a concept that was made popular by *Groundhog Day*, and has since appeared in a surprisingly large number of quality films, such as *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Before I Fall*.

The expectation that has developed from these multiple forays into the concept of a repeating day is that the main character, the one stuck in the time loop, must live a perfect day before he's able to escape from it.

Happy Death Day leans into these expectations, having her struggle over and over to live a perfect day so that she can gain her freedom. She finally achieves her goal, wakes up the next morning, and discovers that she remains stuck.

This method of subverting expectations builds off of tired, over-played genre tropes. Such subversions of expectations are great for comedy, and have been used to perfection in such films as *RED*, *Cabin in the Woods*, and the classic *Airplane!*

There are a couple things to remember about these subversions of expectations.

First, they must play off of expectations that come from overuse. In other words, the events that are expected by the audience should not be the most enjoyable series of events for them to watch. When the audience has seen it all before, repeatedly, and the idea of their expectations bores them, maybe even making them roll their eyes as the story progresses, then giving them something unexpected, something greater, automatically elevates your story. The entertainment value of your story shoots through the roof, and those in the audience walk away feeling thoroughly entertained, willing to enjoy the story again and again.

On the other hand, if your audience is actually looking forward to their expectations, if they feel like the promised story is going to be fun and enjoyable, epic and amazing, then subverting those expectations will do nothing but turn your audience against you. Rather than adding to the viewers' (or readers') experiences, you are taking away the potential for their enjoyment, and don't think the audience won't call you out on it.

Think of the moment at the end of *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens* when Rey holds the lightsaber out for Luke to take. This lightsaber is important. It's significant to the plot. After finishing the movie, we were forced to wait two whole years just to find out *why* it matters so much. That's the foregone conclusion. That's what the film promised us. There's something to find out. It's something epic. When you find out what it is, you're going to be too giddy to continue watching the movie.

Take note: *this is not the time to subvert expectations*.

When Luke finally takes the lightsaber in *Star Wars VIII: The Last Jedi*, looks at it forlornly, then throws it over his shoulder and walks away, it is certainly a subversion of expectations. However, it does not add to the entertainment value of the film. Millions of *Star Wars* fans grew up on the epic story of Luke Skywalker, who transformed from a simple farm boy to a bad-ass wizard. We all wanted to see him become amazing, more amazing than Yoda, more amazing than Obi-Wan.

Taking that away from us by turning his character into the butt of a few meaningless jokes was not just a bad subversion of expectations. Rather, it was a robbery from the audience. It took a potentially epic and entertaining moment from the viewers and replaced it with a sight gag.

Have new issues of *The Writer's Everything* sent to your email <u>every other Monday!</u>!

Remember, your audience is offering you a little bit of their valuable time. In return, they want to, above all else, be entertained. So make sure that you give them the moments that they're hoping for, and don't detract from their experience just so that you can be unexpected. As long as you do that, then the times that you do choose to subvert expectations will be fresh and enjoyable.