



The National Emerging Writer Programme: Overview

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Read

Reading expands your word bank and subconsciously, the more you read, the more you begin to understand how writers structure their work. If you want to write, read as a writer, analysing what works and what doesn't. Look at how the writer introduces character, how they describe location, how they make the scene live for you as the reader. Take notes; apply your observations to your own work.

Developing Your Idea

Spend time fermenting your idea, researching if it touches on areas you are unfamiliar with, letting the idea develop before you put pen to paper. Make notes on characters and locations, think and as Carlo Gébler suggests 'noodle' until you have a grasp on your story and are ready to write. Stephen King suggests that the best stories come from the collision of two unrelated ideas. You need time to allow these ideas to come and to connect.

Creating a Structure

Different writers approach structure in different ways. Some writers, as Sinead Moriarty reveals in *Telling the Story*, write an over view of their story and from that create a chapter plan – writing a few lines about each chapter. This technique enables you to get an overview of your full story, to see how the story unfolds, where the high and low points are. It allows you to see where the story sags, where it needs a point of conflict or an event to move it forwards. Often if you plan in this way, there will be chapters where you don't know what happens – you can leave these blank and see where the story takes you.

Some writers, like Declan Hughes, write organically – they start with a character or a cast of characters and an idea of how the plot will unfold. This technique is ideal for confident writers, but as a new writer starting out, structure, even a loose structure as Carlo Gébler recommends, will give you a framework and keep your story on track.

Carlo suggests using the calendar to make notes on your character's life - when they went to school, when they got married or started their first job (what was it?) This enables you to pinpoint key moments in your character's lives. These character notes will help you get to know your characters, to see the intersections and crucially the points of conflict in their lives, and to give your story structure.

Getting Started

The blank screen is daunting for every writer. Carlo suggests setting yourself a goal every day – of perhaps 200 or 500 words. Importantly, ensure that it is an achievable objective.

As Declan and Sinead both agree, putting writing first is essential if you really want to write. Make time in your day – whether it is early in the morning or when you would normally be watching a soap on TV - to prioritise your writing.

Like the analogy of the dog waiting for his walk that Carlo explains, your psyche will respond to the routine of writing regularly, allowing you to make the most of your writing time.

Try not to imagine you're writing a book at this stage – as Carlo suggests, you may start long before the action really begins in the story, and your early chapters may be warm ups, getting you into the writing groove. These early chapters are important as a way to get you into the story but may not make the final edit.

Once you have words on the page you can work with them, mould and tweak them to produce a polished finished product. Some days you may feel that you are writing rubbish, but as Carlo says, "it's your rubbish", and you will find gold in there when you re-work it. It is essential that you keep writing, even when you don't feel like it, even when it's hard. Write through the tough bits and strive to complete that first draft.

Carlo suggests, before you even start at chapter one, that one great way to get to know your characters is by writing a short piece from their point of view – it could be memory of an incident, their first day at school, a holiday memory or a traumatic memory. It could be their trip to work. This will help you get to know your characters, and to access their story.

If all else fails and you are still staring at the blank page, try writing the description of a scene from your story, your own trip to work, or describe the place where you write. Try free writing – write anything that comes into your head – even if it's 'I don't know what to write'. The most important thing to remember about writing is, as all our authors agree, that writing is rewriting. It really doesn't matter what you produce in your first writing session – it is in the shaping and polishing and rewriting that makes you a writer, in improving and developing your work. It's essential to get the words out of your head and onto the page in order to be able to work with them.

Start at The Beginning

Complex structure, shifts in time, perhaps point of view shifts are elements you can apply to your writing when you have your first draft well underway – as Carlo counsels, start at the beginning of your story and find out what happens as your characters do. It might well be that these early chapters never make the final cut as we mention above, that they contain the back story that makes your characters tick, but they are essential to the story.

As Carlo explains, once something has gone into your story, you can take it out of the final draft, but, even if it is removed, it has become part of a sublimated text that the reader's subconscious understands, it is part of the story, and contributes to the whole.

As a new writer, try not to set yourself an impossible task with shifts in time or location. Start at the beginning of the story and later, when you edit, you can move chapters around, develop new ones. When you do come to write a more polished draft, ensure you start just as the action begins.

Writing the First Draft

No published writer produces what you read on the printed page without extensive re-writing and re-drafting. Your aim as a writer embarking on a new project is to produce a first draft, something you can work with, adapt and develop.

Character

Story is about character – without believable three dimensional characters your reader will not stick with it. You are asking your reader to spend their valuable time reading your book, so it is essential that your characters hold their interest.

The reader does not have to love your characters, but it is essential that they want to understand more, to find out what happens to these characters. If they are shallow clichés, if they act predictably, why should your reader stay with them to find out their story? As a writer you have a contract with your reader to deliver the very best story that you can and studying technique, learning from published authors, is one way to do that.

As Declan suggests, it is essential that you understand what your characters want. What is their motivation? What has happened to them to make them act in the way they do? Understand their motivation, give them depth, good points and bad points, hopes and fears, and you will develop well rounded characters.

Draw from everything around you to create character – from people you know (but not too closely), from TV, film, from magazines. Build characters that are real.

Point of View

Writing sample pieces from the point of view of different characters will give you an indication of the voice for your story. Is it a strong voice that **MUST** be in the first person, or do you need to see more than one point of view? Will a third person voice give you more flexibility?

Regardless of the point of view you chose, it is important that you do not ‘head hop’ - flit between the inner thoughts of different characters to the extent that the reader becomes confused. Always ensure the reader knows who is talking, and who the key players in the scene are. Bear in mind that your reader may have to put your book down to sleep, to work, perhaps to eat. They may not have time to pick it up again for a few days. If they were in the middle of a chapter, will they know who everyone is; will they know who is speaking when they pick it up again?

Some stories are first person stories or third person stories by their very nature, but try writing your story from different points of view to find out what works best for you.

How Many Characters?

Try not to crowd your story – in the 80,000 -100,000 words of a novel there is only so much room to develop each character properly. There will be secondary characters who are essential to make your story flow, but focus on the main characters and their stories. The reader doesn’t want to try and follow a cast of thousands, its hard work, make it easy for them and develop a core caste of brilliant characters.

Ensure every character is distinctive and has a part to play in the story. Will the story collapse if you remove a character? If not then they have no place in the story.

Ensure too that all your characters have different and distinctive names, that their initials are different. Make it easy for the reader by eliminating the chances of confusion.

Change and Conflict

It is essential that your characters change as a result of your story - this is what story is about, conflict and change.

As you create your characters, look at their relationships, look for the conflict and tensions between them – what effect will that have on your story? How does the conflict result in your characters changing? Do they live or die, do they learn something new? Do they discover something?

Story is about conflict, whether major or minor. One character wants something; another is stopping them getting it. Your story is about the resolution of that conflict. There doesn't have to be a happy ending, but ensure there is some level of resolution for characters and your reader will be satisfied.

Keep the Story Moving

While there is space in every story for description, and this is essential in order that the reader knows where they are and who the characters are, essential in order that the reader can form a picture in their heads, it is vital to keep the story moving. Ensure your focus is on the main plot – that every scene is included for a reason. As Sinead says, readers don't want to read filler chapters.

Writing What You Know?

All writers draw on their own experiences when they are writing. Often first books are more autobiographical – you might need to write out your own experiences to get into a truly creative zone.

Carlo suggests that you do enough research to give your story structure and get it on track. Sinead enjoys research but counsels that you mustn't do so much that you never start writing your book – equally you mustn't cram all your research into your book. Of all the research you do, you may only use 15%.

Remember although you are writing about a subject you have no personal experience of, your reader may be an expert, so you need to do enough research to convince them. If you get something wrong it will jar and jerk your reader out of the story.

Declan does his research afterwards, writes intuitively unless he needs to check a vital, pivotal fact. As he points out, over explaining a fact makes it less believable. Trust your reader's imagination to fill in some of the blanks.

Writing Dialogue

As Declan says, telling a story through dialogue brings it to life. Use dialogue to inform the reader, to show them more about your characters through their thoughts and opinions, use it to move the story forwards.

Ensure the reader always knows who is talking and read your dialogue out loud to make sure it sounds realistic. It is vital that a character doesn't tell another character something they already know for the benefit of the reader, it sounds staged and implausible and will jerk your reader out of the story.

Avoid the waffle and preambles that we use in every day speech, get to the point as quickly as possible to move your story forwards.

Bringing Your Story to Life (Using the Five Senses)

As individuals we are constantly, although often subliminally, aware of our surroundings. As you read this is the room warm or chilly? What can you hear if you listen hard? What can you smell? Bring these elements to your story to make it live for the reader. Your aim is for your reader to feel like they are living the story with the characters. In order to do this, they need those extra pieces of information – sounds, smells - to form the full picture. Using these ensures that you are showing the reader the full picture, rather than distancing them from by telling them the story. As Anton Chekhov said, "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."

Listen to Your Subconscious

The subconscious mind is a powerful tool. Once you start your story it will stay with you constantly, brewing in the deep recesses of your brain even when you sleep. Allow your subconscious space to stretch, even if it pushes you in a direction away from your planned story. Remember Declan's revelation "...and the colour of her hair."

Be Aware of the 30,000 Word Slump

Writing isn't easy – it starts well, you are excited about your story, about the characters about their world. For every writer the middle third of a book is hard work. Expect it and know that you have to write through it to reach your goal of a finished first draft.

Editing

Try and write your story to the end before you edit. When you reach the end you will know your characters intimately, will be able to spot the inconsistencies in their behaviour that occurred at the start of your draft. You will also have a strong idea of the story and how it develops, where it needs to start to hook your reader. You can polish and polish the first three chapters of your story but it won't be until the your reach the end that you will know whether they *are* the first three chapters, or whether new chapters need to be written to tease the reader, to start the story with a bang.

Feedback

Feedback is vital to make your story better. As you become more experienced you will develop better critical facilities, but it is almost impossible to truly judge your own work – you are too close to it.

Remember that you are looking for constructive criticism, you want to know what is wrong with your story in order that you can make it better, not what is right with it (you already know it's fabulous!) Find a writers group who can assist you, contact your local library to see if they have one, or consider starting one yourself. Close family and friends will rarely give you constructive, objective criticism.

Congratulate Yourself!

When you reach the end of your first draft, congratulate yourself – as Sinead says, many people start writing a book, but few finish one. It is a remarkable accomplishment to take pictures in your head, and convert them to words in order that they create a picture in your reader's head (to paraphrase Stephen King) – it is a magical thing.

In Summary:

- Write every day or as often and regularly as you can – make it your priority.
- Keep it simple. Keep your plot and your prose simple – don't let your words get in the way of the story.
- Read your work out loud to hear the rhythm and catch anything that jars.
- Listen to your subconscious.
- Spend time mulling on your story and creating real three dimensional characters. Get to know them well. Without character there is no plot.
- Don't forget to describe locations and characters so your reader can see the full picture.
- Use action and dialogue to involve the reader in your story.
- Avoid clichés at all costs.
- Use the five senses to bring your story to life.
- When you redraft, ensure your story starts immediately before the action begins.
- Be conscious of pace – keep your story moving forwards.
- If you get stuck, go back to where it was working and see if you have taken a wrong turn.

Above all, enjoy the process!

The National Emerging Writer Programme is a joint project between www.writing.ie and Dublin UNESCO City of Literature and features Carlo Gébler, Sinead Moriarty and Declan Hughes.

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