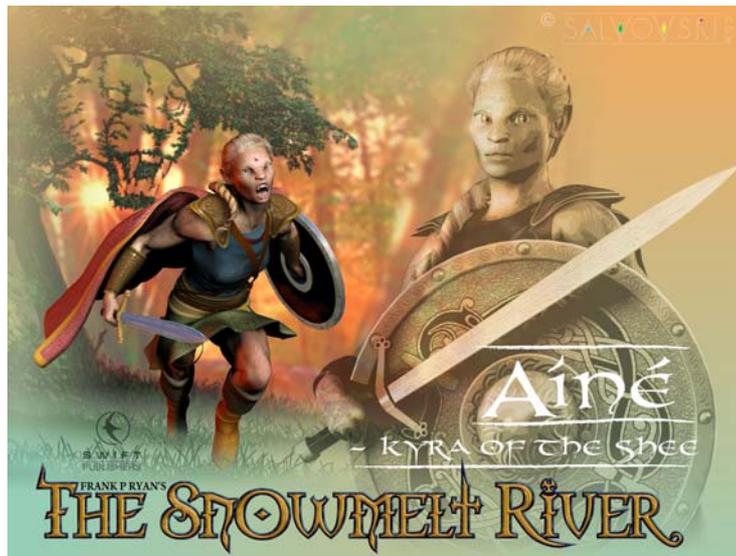


How to Write Your Own Fantasy Short Story – or Novel

By Bestselling author Frank P. Ryan



Ainé, Kyra of the Shee – by artist Mark Salwowski

Some time ago I began an exercise to help young adults and adults to write their own first fantasy short stories.

This began as a collaborative effort with Brendan Murphy, head of John West in Ireland. John West sponsored a nationwide fantasy short story for schoolchildren and I wrote a free access booklet, which was illustrated by the artist Mark Salwowski, to show youngsters how to go about it, even if - especially if - they had never written a short story before. The outcome was a marvellous success, with the competition extending for two more years and, I guess, upwards of 20,000 applicants.

I also helped as senior judge to decide the final winners and prizes, funded by John West, which were awarded in London. A year later, in association with FantasyBookReview, I worked with Lee Sibbald and his excellent organisation, Fantasy Book Review, to set up a worldwide fantasy short story competition for adults. I modified the booklet to show adults how to write their first fantasy short story. This also proved to be a great success, with three terrific winners,

all of whom looked good enough to become professional writers. Teachers have written to me to say how useful the booklet was and at least one of the contestants in the world-wide competition has written to say she is now a published fantasy novelist in her own right. This was a terrific outcome and should encourage others to give it a go.

Any one of you who hankers to do so can take advantage of this to write our own fantasy short story, even if - especially if - you've never written any kind of short story before. Don't be shy. Just get going and write whatever you feel like writing. The joy of it is that nobody will be judging you. Just let the creative juices flow and enjoy the exercise.

Time, perhaps, to allow the lessons to sink in while we enjoy what, in the old-fashioned cinemas, they used to call a short intermission...

Why Mozart Would Have Written Fantasy

Written with an element of tongue in cheek – okay?

I would have loved to write music but lack the formal musical education, though not the appreciation, to do so. I did run an art gallery for nine years and painted pictures that sold, but my real artistic talent, what little I possess of it, lies in literature.

For me, of all the fields of fiction, the one that flies - soars - closest to the mind-blowing ecstasy of great music is epic fantasy. I realise that there may be people out there who disagree - you are very welcome to do so. Nevertheless I hereby defend my thesis.

Great fantasy widens the mind to an almost limitless potential, as does great music. The world you enter, as a fantasy writer, is the same world that a composer enters, quintessentially the world of your own imagination. You can't just look around you and make notes, though deep characterisation, as with any other field of fiction, will involve a deep empathy with people in their joys and suffering. You must allow the strange, sometimes disquieting, but equally rapturous, creative process full rein to invent a world that never has, and perhaps never could, exist.

Of course there are rules in both fields of endeavour. Your fantasy world must make sense, no matter how imaginative, just as the symphonies, concertos, and sonatas - and the best of blues, pop, rap, and jazz - must follow the quasi-mathematical rules of music.

Above all else, the worlds of music and fantasy share two wonders: absolute freedom of creativity and perhaps even more important still, magic.

Okay – so let's get down to it and make a start on how to write that wonderful fantasy short story -- or even a novel – that's inside you and raring to get out into the world...



The Four Friends – by artist Mark Salwowski

Step 1: You Really Can Do It

In many ways a fantasy story is just like any other story, with a single exception. It has to contain an element of magic. Maybe it will be an adventure story – though it could just as easily be a very ordinary kind of story that contains that all-important magical ingredient. Whatever works for you. Maybe you've liked the magic of Harry Potter, where the story is set in a school for magic. But it could also be that your story is set in a very ordinary school where somebody, or something, extraordinary is going on. Or it could be a dark story, with vampires, or ghosts, or witches or goblins, or all of them. It could be a lighter tale, like those of Terry Pratchett's Discworld, with bumbling wizards, whose spells are constantly going wrong, or a friendly character known as Death, who has a fondness for curries. That's the great thing about writing a fantasy story – it's fun to write and your imagination can soar in so many different ways.

But come on now – if it was that easy wouldn't we all be as rich as J K Rowling or Terry Pratchett? Ahem – so okay! There's more to writing a good fantasy story than just the fun aspect. You have to be able to write a good story. And while there is an element of hard work to this, I shall now show you that the hard graft of writing, yes and even process of learning how to go about it, can also be fun.

A 12-year old living in Canada asked me what made me want to become a writer. I could have said "magic" and, in a way, it would have been true. A more practical question is this: Why would anybody – yes even those of you who have no desire at all to become professional writers – want to be bothered with learning how to write? In fact, people – anybody and everybody – need to be able to communicate experiences, or ideas. Writing is a very good way of doing this. It links imaginations. When you read a book or a short story, or a magazine article, your imagination really is linking up, one-to-one, with whoever wrote it. That makes writing a very personal thing – and it also makes reading more personal and exciting than maybe you thought about before. Just think about when you read a book, how you have to imagine characters and settings for yourself. That takes a little bit of your own powers of magic. And it's why the film, if a film follows a book, can sometimes be a little bit disappointing. You have already created the world of the book in your own imagination and the film shows it through somebody else's imagination – the film director's.

Hey – and don't get the idea that writing is only about fiction. Writing is about anything that goes down on paper, or these days into an electronic format, whether novels, short stories, articles in magazines, or on-line – even your own personal e-mails!

Hold on a minute. So how, then, do you define a writer?

Well, if you check your dictionary, the answer may surprise you. A writer is a person who writes. And that means you're a writer already.

Of course not everybody makes their living from writing, but it's obvious that we all need to be able to write. The smarter you are at doing this, the more successful and satisfying your life is going to be. Job applications, essays, lectures and presentations won't worry you as much as they might otherwise. You'll be rootin' an' tootin' with more confidence, because you'll have a better idea of how to go about it.

Am I kidding you?

I don't think so. Because once you grasp the essentials, you will discover that the very process you go through to write your short story, or even a full novel for that matter, applies to quite a lot of that other stuff you will later need to get on with in your life. I should know. I learnt the hard way. I began as a doctor and scientist, writing and reading scientific articles. I then took the quantum leap to writing fiction. From there I returned to writing non-fiction books. And now, I have gone full circle to writing popular fiction again. I have learnt through my own helter-skelter experience that the principles are very much the same for all kinds of writing.

But here you are now, thinking about writing a fantasy story – and all for yourself. Nobody is forcing you to write it. Nobody is telling you what to write about. All I can suggest is that you think about it as fun. What is more, you won't really be judged on what you write. And at the end of it you will have

learnt some neat tricks about writing that will help you understand the books and articles you read, whether for your own enjoyment or to help you analyse job applications – even to answer those bothersome questions in examinations.

But I have never been any good at English!

That doesn't matter. I was no good at English at school. I'm not proud of it, far from it. But I was shunted into the science stream and so I had to drop English literature at a stupidly early level. This was a disadvantage to me later and I had to catch up on what I had lost. So, even if you think you are lousy at English – if, like me, you have never received a single good mark in an English essay – you can turn it around by taking part in this competition. People may be surprised by this more articulate you. They might even ask you what you've been up to. So take a tip from the late great comedian, Peter Cook, who, when asked these same questions on his return after many years absence from the scene, remarked: "I've been thinking about the world and everything in it." Improving your grasp of writing might just open up the same world to you.

So, okay – over the course of this exercise I'll be giving you some helpful tips, based on a lifetime's experience of the ups and downs of a writer, both of fiction and non-fiction. I'll be concentrating on short stories, because a short story is much easier to write than a full length novel. You might even find some of this helpful if you are writing non-fiction, an article for school, or a magazine. You can even ask me a question or two and I'll do my best to answer them. And the great thing, as I have said already, is there will be nobody judging you. It's just going to be fun – a self indulgent exercise just for you.

In the next step I'll show you how to prepare yourself in your own mind before ever you put pen to paper, or fingers to those keys...

So why don't you just make yourself comfortable and get ready to open up your imagination and have a little fun with words.

Step 2: The Engine

When a writer starts to think about writing a story, he or she will usually have something in mind that he or she is interested in, or feels strongly about. That interest, or depth of feeling, will give your story the oomph to get it moving.

It could be a sad or a happy event, or just something so wacky it makes you laugh. When the great Charles Dickens wrote his books about Victorian London, the engine inspiring him was his outrage at the ill treatment of the poor. He had experienced this as a boy when his family was incarcerated in a workhouse. As you might imagine, the effect on the imagination of the boy haunted the imagination of the man, so it became a very powerful engine indeed – so powerful it carried him through all of his great works without ever tiring of it.

So is there some idea, some topic, that really interests you enough to want to write about it? If so this will become the engine that drives you all of the time you are writing about it. It needn't be obvious throughout the actual storyline. It could be a sense of amusement about something you recall, or a sense of outrage about something you witnessed, or happened to somebody. It could be something that is happening to you, or within your ordinary experience – for example, bullying, or whimsical contact with a friend, a romance gone wrong, a romance going right, or a delight on your journey to and from school, or college, or work. It could be a loved one, a hated one, an animal – it could even be a dream that haunted you.

Sit back and think about it.

You could maybe write down whatever it is on paper in a short paragraph. Is it enough to drive your story? When you feel it is, you are now ready to pay attention to more practical things that will help you to do so.

I also said that these instructions will help people to write a whole novel. Well the same engine applies to the big theme that will drive an entire novel too. But here we need to break it down. Each chapter will become a smaller piece of the whole.

Before we write the first, and then every subsequent chapter, we need to ask ourselves a different, but closely related question. What will be the contribution of the chapter to the story as a whole? Every chapter must make a significant contribution. If it doesn't, your reader will become bored and might even put it down.

So before ever you start the chapter you must imagine – or even sketch on paper, or into your computer – what this chapter is going to contribute to the story as a whole. As with thinking about the theme, or motor of a short story, you can spend a week or more just thinking about it. This could be a step along the storyline. But it could just as easily be the introduction of a character, or the further development of a character in such a way that it adds to the development of plot and enhances the interest of the novel to your reader.

Why not take a look at a favourite short story, or a favourite novel, and see if you can figure out the engine that inspired the writer to write it.

In the next step I shall deal with one of the simple and practical ways you can enhance your ability to actually write it. I shall also explain how there are, broadly speaking, two types of approach to writing. Which is likely to apply to you?

Coming to a brain near you very soon... After this... well, you know what!

Intermission: this one is called sticking to your guns

This is one of the most important lessons I have learnt over 20+ years as a professional writer.

A long time ago – about 1995, I think – I decided to write a fantasy series of novels. I wanted to start with my characters as teenagers, because that's a very interesting and important age, when personalities are being laid down. I started out with six characters and ended up, in *The Snowmelt River*, with four, Alan (American), Kate (Irish), Mark (Londoner) and Mo (adopted Australian half aborigine). I was already a successful novelist, with three thrillers published, *Goodbye Baby Blue*, *Sweet Summer* and *Tiger Tiger*, which eventually found a readership of hundreds of thousands. Should have been no problem extending to fantasy...

Don't you believe it!

One of the most pernicious things about being a writer is the fact that the establishment tries to peg you into a hole. One pigeonhole if you like. And there you are supposed to stay. Well I wasn't for staying.

Maybe I was a little crazy to try to do this. But recently two very experienced editors agreed with me – that writing is a folie-a-deux – with both writers and editors/publishers needing to be slightly mad, and with the two creative madnesses entwined, rather like we grow into one another as married couples.

I spent two or three years allowing the teenage characters to come alive inside my head. Meanwhile I sketched out four books in a series, each a story in itself, but the whole moving on as what my German friends would call a gestalt – a whole.

But now the pigeonholing came into effect. My fiction publisher balked at what I was writing and my agent was also concerned. I agreed, against my better judgement, to rewrite the first book, already substantially written, as an adult fantasy thriller – so it would "fit better with my profile". I have to admit that it was successful, in sales terms, and also reader response, but not for me. When it came to the second book, I had to write a subtle, humorous relationship between Kate and a dragon. Wouldn't work in any way other than Kate as teenager.

And the truth was I missed my teenage gang of friends. I had allowed them to be entombed in the limbo of characters locked away within the writer's imagination, never to be allowed the freedom to develop.

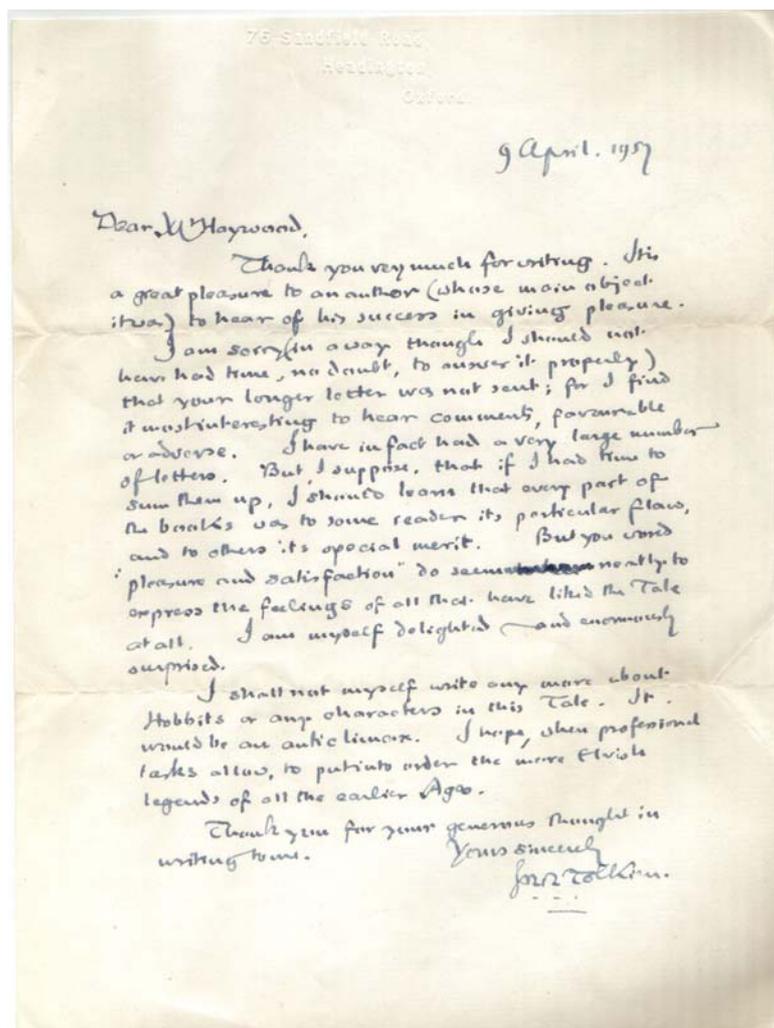
I dumped the series. I recalled my copyright. And I probably sulked. Not very grown up of me, I confess. But I never gave up on my original plan. Now, with a new determination, I went back to basics and allowed my teenage

personalities the freedom to emerge onto the pages. And boy was it

better! Those personalities, locked away for years, appeared to relish their release. They rewarded me by doing things that surprised me. They really made the whole thing work.

The Snowmelt River gathered some fine reviews - and slowly the e-mails from readers started to come my way. Most readers appeared to love the book. They found they got to escape into a different world while they were reading it. And that was what I wanted. But most of all, they identified, really strongly, with the teenage characters, who had such passionate and intense interactions, and who were maturing to adulthood during the series. For me that was the most important thing – it's what the link between writer and reader is all about.

The Snowmelt River went to #8 in the epic fantasy bestseller list at amazon.co.uk. Sales into America began, just as I got my teeth into the second book of the series, The Tower of Bones, and I went on to complete The Three Powers epic fantasy quartet.



A very nice letter from Tolkien to a reader of Lord of the Rings

Step 3: Pay Attention To Ordinary Things

Look at what is happening to you as part of your ordinary life. Naïve writers think that stories have to be about extra cool people and events, but the very opposite is often true. Ordinary life has a magic of its own, though it is easy to miss it because we are so accustomed to it. You can use the way people talk, for example accents and dialect, to tell the reader a lot about them.

So here you are, on your way to college, or work. It's a journey you do every day. You are so familiar with it all you hardly notice what's going on around you anymore. Today I want you to look more closely at things. Where are you right now? Don't just say in the car, on the bus, or the underground train. Describe where you are. Describe what day it is, where exactly you are, the colours, the lights, the movement of the vehicle, the way it makes you feel to be there.

Make a paragraph of description about what you are actually seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting – remember smell and taste are very closely connected. If you have a bit of trouble doing that, why not play a little game. Let's say that you are no longer the familiar you but a stranger, say from some distant country, or galaxy. Now how does that altogether familiar scene look to you? What do the sounds suggest when you close your eyes? What can you really smell? Would you know where you were if your eyes were closed – and why?

I've given you a single example - a journey to college or work. You can choose any other you would like to explore. The core message is to open your creative eyes to the normal world about you. You don't need to use clever words to describe things. What you do need is accurate words – words that neatly capture what you are witnessing so that a friend – your reader – could share your experiences.

When you have done this once or twice, write a paragraph about that very ordinary world into a notebook, or electronic device.

You might even begin to wonder how that so very ordinary world might change, subtly or even in a more ominous, or comical, or intriguing way, if something were to intervene and cut through the ordinary.

Maybe – just maybe – the change you are beginning to notice, the different look, feel, smell, touch – is not really ordinary at all? What if you are seeing something magical? What effect might this intrusion of something magical, big or small, have on this ordinary world? What effect might it have on you, now that you have noticed it? Perhaps you have discovered the spark that will fire your imagination for your story – or the opening chapter of your novel?

Step 4: Have Fun With The Senses

Think about how you notice the world around you.

You don't just use your eyes to register the world around you. You also touch things and feel them through your fingers, or like the breeze on your face. You smell things like plants, or cut grass, or cow dung, or the breakfast cooking, or your partner's scent. In much the same way, to bring your fictional world alive for you, as you write it, and for your reader as they read it, you must extend the range of your senses.

You use your ears a lot more than you might realize. For example when you hear voices approach, or a car coming from behind, or the sounds of birds in the garden or the countryside – or the tone of voice in which somebody is talking to you. Do you realise how different every human voice actually sounds? Some people think that the sound of his or her voice makes a big difference when we fall in love. Think how much more powerful your writing will be if you can capture this. I'm not suggesting that you over do it. I'm suggesting that, in the first instance, you begin to notice voices, what for example is different between, say, a male voice and a female voice? What is different between the voices of two people you know and love, or maybe two people you know and dislike? In part, it will be their accents, the words they like to use, a familiar phrase. But it will go deeper than that. Is his or her voice high, or low? Do they modulate it when they are talking? Is it whiney, lulling, questioning, grating, soft and reassuring, commanding? What would you think if you heard Frodo's voice speaking to you down the phone? Or Sam's, Gandalf's – Gollum's? You are beginning to realise that what makes a good writer is, first and foremost, a good observer. And further, what makes a good observer an even better writer is to practice how to convert observation into the written word.

Isn't it interesting how powerful an association we can make with smell? I suspect that smell plays a much bigger part in our liking or disliking people than we think. Ladies have cottoned on to this since before written history. Indeed how fascinating that the scents beloved of women are so often derived from the lovely scents of flowers. Insects have a phenomenal sense of smell when it comes to pheromones. Maybe there's something of that in us? Perhaps we have more in common with the bees than we think?

Do you associate a grandmother with the taste of the food she cooks for you? How for example do you really recall your close relatives and friends? You might recognise the touch of your father's hand, or the shriek of your mother's voice at a hundred yards – but could you describe these things in a simple accurate sentence? With practice, yes you could. What is it that immediately springs to mind about your best friend – or your worst enemy? Is it a look on a face, a gesture, a way of walking, a sound, or even a smell, a single act of kindness or cruelty? The way he or she dresses? Have fun exploring this world of the senses. It will develop your powers of observation.

Intermission: Keith Richard's biography

I've returned to reading Keith Richard's autobiography, *Life*. Enjoying it a lot. I played lead guitar in an amateur R & B group back in the day, so I guess that Keith lived the life I aspired to when I was a teenager. That makes the book especially fascinating to me. But also the contacts and interactions with all of the big names in early blues and R & B also make it particularly interesting. He was a bad boy, in his own admission, and shouldn't be able to remember it so vividly - but he does and we're all richer for it.

Here's a quote from Keith Richards' book...

"The most bizarre part of the whole story is that having done what we intended to do in our narrow, purist teenage brains at the time, which was to turn people on to the blues, what actually happened was we turned American people back to their own music."

Is that the truth or not? Probably depends on your perspective. But even if only partly true, it was quite an achievement.



The fictional Mark's crystal (the one he broke) from *The Snowmelt River*

Step 5: Get Cookin' With Word Power

Hey – do you think it's accidental that we link the concept of words with power? No way! A writer is defined as a person who writes. That means journalists and non-fiction writers as well as novelists. It means you as well as me. And your vocabulary – this is you the writer now – is an essential tool of your trade. Improving your vocabulary is like arming yourself with more precise, cutting edge tools to get on with your art. Think about an artist, or

sculptor, or composer – do they need tools and do they need to put a lot of effort into learning how to use them?

How many times have I heard people in my audiences say that they can't write... Or that writers are born that way!

Fugedabahtit!

Anyone can write. If you can read, you can write. A lot of the difficulty with people taking on some writing exercise for the first time is simple lack of practice and basic know-how. Not the know-how of how to put marks on a page, but the know-how of how to write clearly, to capture the precise mood, or inflexion, or weather condition, or conversation that is already there in your mind waiting to get out.

I recall a highly educated colleague asking me what was the difference between himself and me – in other words what made me a writer and him a non-writer. I told him about a wonderful experience I had when I was out for a walk in my village. I wandered into a patch of trees, which still had their autumn leaves, but every leaf, and twig, and blade of grass were thickly coated with hoar frost. It was like wandering into a wintry fairytale. The difference between us was that, because I was a "writer", in other words somebody who had gone to the trouble to hone up all aspects of the art of writing, I could describe it on paper in a way that enabled the reader to experience it too. He could not. Yet it wasn't down to differences in our genetic make-up. It was just down to practice and vocabulary.

Whenever you come across an interesting word that you yourself would never think of using, add it to a dictionary file in your notebook or on your computer. I'm not necessarily talking about big or fancy words. I'm talking about what I call "capture words", words that bring alive a sensation, or an interesting object, or emotion, or experience. Next time you are reading a book or a magazine feature, in print or on-line, stop when you come across a word that surprises you. Does it carry a powerful meaning just by itself? Is it a word you would never have thought of using yourself. If so, capture the damn thing.

If you are interested in writing fantasy, build up a special dictionary of fantasy words, like incantation, mage, warlock, lore, eldritch, and so on. Look up their true meaning in a dictionary and Google them too. For example, you might learn something by Googling the spiritual beliefs of some ancient peoples, like the Sumarians. You might even get an idea for your story, maybe even a whole new idea to drive it along. You don't need to go bonkers with your dictionary making – collect maybe forty or fifty unusual or fantastical words and you're cookin, baby.

Are you getting my drift? This is all part of what is called the "craft" of writing. And anybody who wants to can acquire it for their own delectable use and pleasure. The better your vocabulary, the more word power you have, the more powerful you become.

Step 6: Body Language

People communicate mainly through words, but also through gestures, like hugs or handshakes, or looks, good and bad. Look at how people communicate through gestures. In building up a character or personality, you need to think about their voice, their sex, their age, their likely background in terms of education and experience. In real life different people have very specific traits that show through the body language.

Okay – let me make the point by asking you, say, if a friend, or partner, or family member, were to come to your door, or enter the room, or if you were to hear him or her climb the stairs (run, plod, pace, hum to himself or herself) to tell you something exciting when you were in your bedroom, or the bathroom, cleaning your teeth... You'd know who it was, wouldn't you? Why? If you said something sad, or exciting, or boring to him or her, you would know their reaction long before they said anything, wouldn't you?

You get the idea...

Think about the meaning of the expression "body language". We pick up on other people's body language automatically, but in writing about people we need to find simple ways of describing this in words that others will instantly recognise. The human face is a communication device all by itself. What, for example, if somebody frowns when telling you something that is supposedly good, or cheerful or helpful? What if the butcher blinks a little too much when reassuring you that the steak is excellent? What if your worst enemy is wearing a caring face when imparting an unpleasant message? You getting my drift?

Okay, now – so what kind of a body language would a warlock, or a witch, display? You could make it kind of scary. But how more interesting if they had some brilliantly realised human body language! Like somebody you know all too well.

Dickens was brilliant at this and so was Mark Twain. Why don't you read a short story by either of them and see what I mean. What about Ebenezer Scrooge in *Oliver Twist*. Does he really come across as a bad guy – or quite a decent guy at heart who had wandered from the path through circumstances?

Or look at how the adults around Huckleberry Finn will often say one thing and their body language says the very opposite. If somebody were to say something to you and their body language said the opposite, which would you believe. Use that in your writing and the reader will read it just as easily as you do without having to have it explained. That's good writing.

When I had my fantasy series in mind, many years ago, I was persuaded, against my better judgement, to redraft the first book as an adult thriller style fantasy. The reason for this was that I had a good track record in writing thrillers. But I felt dissatisfied with the result, a book called *The Sundered*

World. In spite of the fact it sold really well, I reclaimed it and annulled it. So I could get back to deep characterisation, with my characters beginning as teenagers.

If you want to be successful as a fiction writer, characterisation is going to be important to most types of fiction. And body language is an important facet to characterisation. Anybody can take advantage of this. All you have to do is look around you. Watch people, then convert what you see to a succinct expression. But don't overdo it, unless you are a cartoonist.

Cartoonists are often good at drawing body language, especially facial expressions. But of course they exaggerate somewhat, as do comedians. The wide-eyed look of shock (or innocence) in real life is more likely to be an elevation of the eyebrows or a slight retraction of the upper eyelids.

It's kind of interesting to realise that you can influence people, or a situation, just through body language. Think about writing a short journalistic piece that involves speaking to people or interviewing them. How more powerful if you add in a little description of how they are dressed, their posture, what they do as they speak, their body language.

Write examples of some of the people you know who really go to town on body language. Once you start to notice stuff like that, and even more when you start to put it into words, you'll get better at it. And think how useful it might be later in life when you have learnt how to interpret other people's body language – like in a job interview or a romantic situation.

Intermission: A really scary story

I make no apology for the fact that my sole science fiction novel, *The Doomsday Genie* is a very scary thriller. I used real knowledge of evolutionary biology to create an entity, which - though I never planned it this way - became the dominating personality in the novel. Since it is based in America, I thought it appropriate to write it in American English.

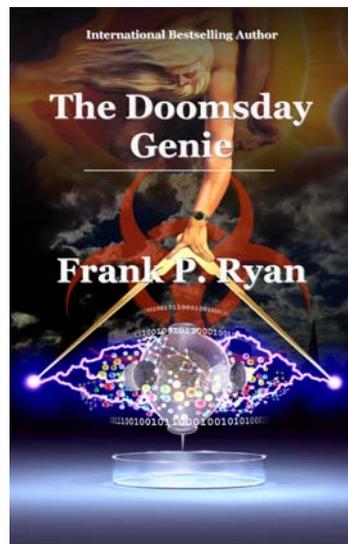
I was, in part, influenced by admiration for my friend, the late Lynn Margulis, whose work on symbiosis will, in time, be seen for its true iconoclastic nature.

I was also concerned that genetic engineering was potentially dangerous, even if it might also be argued that it is a necessary step towards the future. This, combined with the very human hubris involved in the race to create the first truly artificially generated life-form - none that have appeared so far would qualify for this as I see it - was the spark that set my imagination on fire.

I had fun with Mark Salwowski who designed the utterly brilliant cover design.

I used to imagine how it actually worked - it is described in the novel - while listening to One Tree Hill by U2. This dip into a dystopic, not to say

apocalyptic, world proved useful in drafting Book 3 of my fantasy series, which is called The Sword of Feimhin.



Mark's brilliant cover for The Doomsday Genie

Step 7: Action – not words

Don't introduce your readers to your characters in verbal descriptions. Let their behaviour and actions speak for themselves.

In setting out to write a four book epic fantasy series, I decided that there would be four main characters, who begin as teenagers and mature to adulthood during the series. Each book would feature one of the characters as central. Book One featured Alan, Book Two Kate, Book Three (nearing completion) Mark and Book Four Mo. Thus in Book One, Alan's personality is of critical importance. Here's my showing his character in action in the second chapter...

"How did you make sense out of something that couldn't possibly make any sense. He must have gone into another of his blank spells, his eyes wide open but seeing nothing, when, abruptly, he came to with the sense of danger. There was a homp-homp noise from somewhere nearby, something strange cutting through the dreamy morning. And whatever it was, it was heading his way.

"Then he saw the swans.

"He had noticed their nest, with three huge eggs in it, on one of the small reedy islands that dotted the shallows. Something, maybe the toss of his line, had made the birds panic. The homp-homp was the beating of their wings as they took off, still only half out of the water and rising into the air like two white avenging angels. He saw every detail highlighted as if in slow motion,

the pounding wings, the prideful black knobs on the upraised orange bills, the eyes all-black. He could hear the power in those webbed feet as they battered the surface. For several moments, as they cleared the water just thirty feet from where he was standing, he was overwhelmed by a sense of what he would later recall as fate. He did nothing at all to save himself. He just stood still returning, stare for stare, the rage in those alien eyes."

What does this tell you about Alan's personality? And how much more interesting to show it rather than describe it.

Another useful tip...

When starting your short story, or your opening chapter, why not cut through right into the middle of an action sequence rather than lead up to it. Then you can flash-back to the lead up to it a little later. This is exactly what I do in *Snowmelt River*. We enter the action in a short first chapter, then flash-back in chapter two, where the character of Alan is deepened as above.

Much more dramatic.

Step 8: Moods and Situations

Compile a situations diary.

You might start by writing just a single paragraph about some situation you recall from earlier in the day. You will naturally write this from your own viewpoint, which, in formal terms, is called the "first person". All right – but now I am going to suggest a new slant on this. After you have written it from your point of view, try writing the same situation from a different witness – what fun to see the same situation (with you present) but through the senses of maybe a rival, or even an enemy. You could even inject a bit of self-deprecatory humour into it if you imagined it wasn't a person at all but maybe a dog, or a horse, or a beady-eyed crow. What if the beady-eyed crow took rather a cynical view of it all, like a tetchy old granddad or grandma? In moving out of the normal frame of reference, you have already taken a step towards a more fantastic perspective. What's the betting this beady-eyed cynical crow would have a body language of its own?

A useful tip. You have to keep to one perspective in any block of writing, be it a chapter or short story. But if you introduce separate sections of your chapter or short story - for example by introducing a line space - you can switch perspectives with the different sections. This can be very dramatic if done well.

Moods. Some situations, or people, cheer you up and others make you feel sad, or angry. Moods, like emotions, are very powerful things for a writer. Good writers know how to control the moods, and emotions, of their readers. See if you can think of ways in which you can influence the mood or emotion of a reader. Think for example of the weather. Think how the same event

would look very different on a cold, wintry day, or a sunny spring morning. This kind of "ambient" world will heavily influence the mood of your story. Tolkein evokes moods brilliantly. For example he will get you to sympathise with his Hobbits by making them lovable or funny. He also conjures up haunting images of the passing landscape that invade your mind and control your mood and emotions, thus preparing you for what is about to happen. Do you want to make your reader feel good, or apprehensive? Does their body language of your character, or characters, help reinforce the same ambience? People will say they can read a message in people's eyes, but eyeballs, other than the size of the pupils, don't actually change. It's the face around the eyes that actually changes. Why don't you look at yourself in the mirror and pull faces, sad, angry, laugh, cry – then you'll see for yourself how faces have a complex, and very interesting, body language of their own.

Intermission: What's in a name?

In 1998 I wrote to the late great Iain Banks to talk about names. Iain had decided, for good or for bad, to use the name Iain Banks for his contemporary fiction - I disdain to use the term "mainstream fiction" since I regard no fiction to be mainstream - and to use the name Iain M Banks for his science fiction. My question to him was had this worked? Was he happy with it? I was planning to separate out my popular science (Frank Ryan) from my fiction, (Frank P. Rvan). His reply is posted below.

Dear Dr Ryan

Michelle from Midas passed on a copy of your fax. My advice would be to keep your own name for everything, but maybe that's just because I've had to answer the "M" question (as in: 'Why do you have an M in your name for the SF but not for the mainstream?') for what feels like every week of the last twelve years.

Your mileage may differ, as our American cousins would say, and your publishers might have other suggestions too, but that's my tuppence-worth.

Under any name, let me wish you all the best with the books.

With best wishes



Iain Banks

Step 9: Raising Your Game

The deeper your writing, the more universal, the greater the potential to interest readers. This is a more complex concept to explain than some of the previous sessions. Moreover it applies to both fiction and non-fiction, and to short stories as to entire novels.

The great novelists, as with the great non-fiction writers, will automatically think this way when they are writing. If you can write such a book, or a story or article, whether in fiction or non-fiction, you are more likely to achieve success. This may involve global themes or it may involve a story, set in microcosm, that translates widely enough for many people to identify with it.

Characterisation, body language, your power of observation, and so on, will all count. But basically all of these aids will only help the power and depth of the central theme – what I called the motor or engine that drives the narrative.

The simplest way – in theory – of doing this is to develop a storyline so deeply human that anybody, from any background, would understand and empathize with it. This might involve themes like greed followed by downfall, or frustrated love, grief and redemption. Think of films such as the *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, novels, like Emily Bronte's passionately human *Wuthering Heights*, or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Shakespeare does this again and again. But few of us aspire to the profundity of Shakespeare. We are obliged, perhaps – to paraphrase the words of Rene Dubos – to write locally while thinking globally.

Reading widely, or exploring the world of film, or theatre, is an excellent route to discovering profound themes while also learning much of the art of writing. I take the view that every time you read, or watch, great creative art, a little bit of it rubs off and stays with you.

Step 10: Hidden Themes, Hopes and Fears Hidden Themes.

Stories often have a more subtle theme running through them. I don't just mean the storyline. This may well be the true engine behind the telling of the story. But it can be more integral to the characters and their motivations within the storyline. Sometimes even the writers themselves don't realise this is happening until after they have written the story. Think about the books or films or stories you have really loved, and try to recall what it is about them that made them so special to you. Maybe you sensed and identified with this hidden theme without ever realizing it. In *Lord of the Rings*, the hidden theme was the death of magic. For with the destruction of the Ring, the age of magic ended. Tolkien used a metaphor for this tragic ending, when the elves, and Frodo, got on board the fleet that was "sailing West". In my own fantasy, *The Snowmelt River*, the hidden theme is metamorphosis – the fact that beings can change, dramatically and radically, like a caterpillar turns into a butterfly,

as if there were two separate beings, and whole life histories, within a single individual. In my fantasy I like to imagine that people could metamorphose in this way. The operation of a secret theme, deep under the story, can be a powerful engine driving the story.

This overlaps with another aspect of story, or novel, writing – developing subtle but very important aspects of personality. I have labelled this aspect, hopes and fears.

Hopes and Fears.

Maybe you long for something that appears to be out of your reach? This might make an excellent facet to your story, or novel. But you shouldn't state it bluntly or directly. Far better to develop it in the plot and dialogue. Maybe your life hasn't encouraged you to think you can write anything that would interest anybody else. Maybe there has been pain or hurt in your life that you think about a lot. Maybe you have been bullied, or told you were unattractive. Maybe you suffer from a disability? How different would the perspective of a scene be if it was through the senses of a young girl in a wheelchair? But try not saying she's in a wheelchair – have her push the wheels round, or staring up at somebody from the sitting position, or reveal it in conversation. Now you're getting the knack of it. Maybe there's some ambition you have always dreamed about. Give it to one of your characters. But make it difficult for them, perhaps even more difficult than it might be for you yourself. Indeed, while I am on this subject, don't, for goodness sake, base every character on yourself. Imagine beyond yourself, a different age, a different sex, a very different personality. Although you might not have thought of it this way at the time, deeply felt experiences, including hurt – perhaps especially hurt – is food and drink to a writer. Just writing about it may help to exorcise the pain. Or maybe there was something you wanted, or wanted to do, and failed. You might succeed in your writing about it. In the opening chapters of *The Snowmelt River* we discover that all four of the main characters have suffered bereavement, a sense of uselessness, pain – even physical abuse. This unites them into a profound friendship. That theme, though not always directly expressed, drives everything they do throughout every page of the book.

Intermission: Where Mo's Torus came from

In my fantasy series we get strong hints that Mo is different from the three other friends. There is something mystical about her, as well as a deeper vulnerability. She also has an Australian aboriginal dimension to her which will be a feature of the final book in the series.

The curious thing is that Mo's Torus, like the crystals of Alan, Kate and Mark, really does exist. I have attached a picture of it from which you will see that even in its nascent state it is strange Stone Age and carved without the aid of metal tools.



Mo's Torus

Step 11: Ya Gotta Have Rhythm

Did you know that language has a kind of rhythm to it? This depends very much on the way sentences are constructed, with short and long sentences in the right kind of order or sequence within a paragraph. Why don't you try reading a paragraph or two of your favourite book out loud and you'll see what I mean. You always hear rhythm better if you speak it aloud. Many writers, including myself, will read our writing aloud when we have completed a full draft of the story, or novel. This might sound tedious in the extreme, particularly if you are writing a novel. But you'll be surprised at what you find wrong with it when you do so.

Because you are so familiar with the story, and your own writing, your eyes – yes, and I'm afraid your little grey cells – have a dratted tendency to skip over

those tiny errors without noticing that they are there. Try reading just a few paragraphs and see what I mean. You'd be surprised what you gain from this. That's a good enough reason to read it aloud. But there's a second, equally important, reason why you should do so. Only by reading it out will you hear the rhythm of your writing with the clarity that others will read it for themselves.

Sometimes writers will deliberately create a certain type of rhythm. For example thriller writers – and writers of action, or even love, scenes, will deliberately set out to construct a series of short, direct sentences. Sometimes “less can be more” as they say. This can work very well to achieve the dramatic effects you want. But even with short sentences, you need to vary the length and construction of sentences. Should you leave out all adverbial clauses? Should you avoid all adjectives? Let me give you a useful tip that might help you decide how you are going to create exactly the right rhythm for your story, or novel. Try reading aloud the rhythm of the narrative in a story, or novel, by a great writer whose work you admire and whose category of writing, thriller, romance, contemporary, you are writing in yourself.

Look at how Conan Doyle, or Ernest Hemingway, or Ursula Le Guin (especially her Earthsea Quartet), or Bruce Chatwin (especially in *The Songlines*) construct short, direct sentences and paragraphs. What effect does this directness have on you, as reader. George RR Martin is currently riding high on the success of his *Game of Thrones* series of fantasy novels. I like these very much myself. You might imagine that their success is based on the taut and richly imagined plots and the characterisation, but look again at the rhythm of his sentences. Are they not very direct – sort of Hemingwayesque direct? That's a very great skill and it really does work. I'll talk a little more about the characterisation aspects next time.

Action scenes will often be written in a series of short, abrupt sentences. But more flowing scenes – scenes in which you might wish to capture a depth of feeling, or a beautiful description of landscape, might be better served by varying the sentence length, using adverbial clauses to smooth the flow, and so on. Think of books that have you float away on narrative and description, like Charles Dickens, or Tolstoy's great novels, or Pasternak's sublime *Dr Zhivago*, and you will see that there is also a profound and important place for different styles of rhythm. If you want a very good modern example – I am currently reading *The Hydrogen Sonata* by Iain M Banks, who will sometimes create such a complex sentence it fills an entire paragraph. This choice of rhythm and style is, of course, deliberate and is part of his characterisation of the super-intelligent Minds intrinsic to his sentient spaceships.

Rhythm is one of the most difficult things to capture for an aspiring writer and it tends to come with practice and over time. Don't give up. Be patient. Write, read what you have written aloud, read the work of others aloud, and you'll get the hang of it.

Step 12: How to Create Winning Characters

This is one of the most testing, but also one of the most rewarding, aspects of writing fiction, whether short story or novel or even playwriting. If the characters you create are interesting to your readers you're half way there. Writing interesting and engaging characters may seem the simplest and most obvious task, but in practice it can often be the hardest thing of all.

Why?

Because people are complex when you try to analyse them. It's what makes life interesting. Everybody is different, as they say. And you never really know what's going on inside somebody else's mind. But take a step back and think about this. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to see into those minds and come to know more of how they think and work? If you can do that, you are likely to be successful, and maybe not just as a writer of fiction but as a playwright, or even a film script writer. Indeed, now I come to think about it, writers of plays and film scripts are put into a tricky situation in which characterisation is all important. Have you ever looked at a play script? The narrative tends to be very sparse. John enters room – or Jill sits in train carriage. I'm overdoing it a bit, but you see what I mean. What matters is really what John or Jill does or says on stage.

To write really good characters, people who surprise you, shock you, as audience, or reader – people who absolutely capture your attention – you need to keep a close eye on real people. Not people typing, or being paid to be nice to other people, but people when they are being themselves. When they are looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend, when they are interacting with strangers, when they are working on something that is very important to them, or most importantly of all when they are alone. I'm not suggesting you spy on them. I'm suggesting you talk to them, observe them, test them and have a laugh with them.

Ask yourself if you really know how this character really feels, how he or she might deal with confrontation or danger, how he or she might deal with an opportunity. Can you answer the question, what does this human being want most out of life, what would they sacrifice everything for in this world? That said, what would he or she settle for? Do you know what topics interest them, what's their favourite music, or book, or film - what kind of person they like as friends, as lovers?

A caution about people you know...

If you base your characters on real people be very careful indeed to change them out of all proportion. Nothing is likely to offend others more than your stealing their characters. Can I suggest a simple logical approach that might then be further modified anyway you like?

1. How many main characters are you going to introduce? Who are they? What are their basic descriptions?

2. For each character, decide on the sex (gender is a grammatical and not a biological term for sex). Decide how old. Decide on skin and hair colouring. Decide on age, height, oddities, such as illnesses, limps, visual or hearing problems, etc. If all of your characters are perfect yours is going to be an extremely dull and unconvincing book.

3. Sketch out your group of characters on paper. You don't have to be too fussy about it. Now – and this is the big step – allow your characters to grow and evolve inside your head. They shouldn't just share your interests, phobias, prejudices, likes and dislikes, although they will undoubtedly have some of your character embedded here and there. Think of it as a way of living new lives through your characters, of finding out what other lives might be like, and in particular encourage experimentation into character traits you wouldn't dream of having yourself.

4. They should surprise you. Have you ever been surprised when somebody you know, a relative, a friend, a lover, an acquaintance you perhaps underestimated, surprised you? Characters doing something that surprises everybody is an excellent thing to introduce into a narrative, whether a book or a play or a film.

5. Think about the characters for a while before you begin to write about them. Watch how people show their characters in the way they speak, in what they do, in how they respond to others, in how they react with others, particularly with friends, strangers, with family, with lovers. Get ideas from interesting people you know, borrow a mannerism from here and there, a feeling about somebody, the colour of hair, a telling small habit. See them in your mind's eye, including their body language. When they are moving around inside your head, doing things that surprise you, you know are ready to start writing about them.

6. If you are writing fantasy, your characters don't need to be human. And having non-human characters will be enhanced by paying attention to all of the tips I've been giving you. What if the storyteller (observer) is a parrot, who wears a top hat and smokes a cigar? What's that body language telling you about his or her character? What, instead, if he, or she, were a crow, missing feathers, who's smoking a spliff and speaks with a Liverpuddlian, or Brooklyn, accent? What does that tell you? Going out of human society into animal and other – ghost, dragon, bird, pet dog – character can make humorous fantasy interesting.

7. Most important tip of all, get into a habit of enjoying exploring character in your ordinary contacts and life. Make it a joy for you so you endlessly listen, take in, laugh at, get drunk with, explore humanity ... Abjure prejudice, or recognise it only to use it. If you do the rewards might be magical.

8. For examples of this, you might get some ideas from Penny, Gully and Henriette, in my third book in the fantasy series, *The Three Powers*. The book

title is *The Sword of Feimhin*. Readers with writing ambitions will be free to make contact and discuss any aspects that interest you.

Step 13: The Narrative Hook

I never cease to be amazed to think that other people will sit down and bother to read a book I have written from cover to cover. I suspect that many writers feel exactly the same as I do. It's kind of weird, but also a very satisfying feeling, that they will have the patience and interest to do this. But if you want to seduce your readers into reading your story, or novel, you must capture their interest right at the start. This cunning strategy is called the "narrative hook".

One of the most famous of all narrative hooks is the lines from the novel, *The Go-Between*, by L.P. Hartley, which reads, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." But there are very many different types of narrative hook. It could be constructed by the introduction of an interesting character, or place – or a controversial viewpoint seen through the eye or mind of a character. Indeed, if you are really clever and writing a novel rather than a story, it could comprise an entire, usually fairly short, opening chapter.

Why don't you have a look at the opening paragraph of *The Hobbit*, or Book One Chapter 1 of *Lord of the Rings*. The hooks are right there in the opening paragraphs.

I used a short chapter as a narrative hook in the opening pages of my fantasy series, *The Three Powers*, Book One of which is *The Snowmelt River*. Did it work? Readers will have to decide for themselves – but *The Snowmelt River* did enter the epic fantasy top ten bestsellers in Amazon Kindles.

Assuming you have decided what your fantasy story, or novel, is going to be about, and you already have those characters popping out of your head, can you now think of something really gripping you could put into the opening paragraph, or whole first chapter – it could be a strange question, or a minor observation that seems out of place, something that is likely to startle or intrigue your reader and make him or her want to read on?

You've got it? Well done! Let the magic begin...