TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

The Five Facts of Fiction

A Fun Way to Write Great Stories and a Great Way to Have Fun Reading Them

by
Steve Peha

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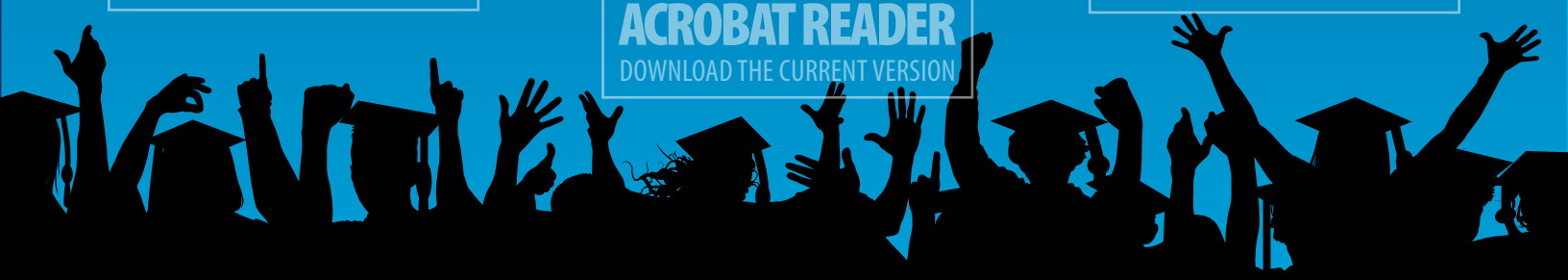

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by Steve Peha

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The Secrets of Sensational Stories

Everybody loves a good story. But it's just as true that everybody hates a bad one. There's a lot on the line when you write fiction. Readers have high expectations. Many have been reading great stories by the world's best writers since they were old enough to hold a book in their hands and turn the pages. Personally, I find this quite intimidating. I make no secret of the fact that I am afraid of writing fiction. But that doesn't mean I won't give it a try. Especially if I have a little help.

A few years ago, I learned that if I want to write a good story, I need to know the Five Facts of Fiction:

- **Fact #1: Fiction is all about character.** The best stories are built around rich, complex, extremely interesting characters.
- **Fact #2: Fiction is all about what your character wants.** Your character wants one thing more than anything else in the world and that one thing drives everything your character does.
- **Fact #3: Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.** Some characters get what they want, others fail. This is how you develop the plot of your story.
- **Fact #4: Fiction is all about how your character changes.** After everything that happens, your character is forever changed. This is what makes your story meaningful.
- **Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world that you create.** You choose the people, places, things, and ideas in your story. Your choices influence the meaning of the story and your readers' level of interest.

Fiction is the hardest kind of writing to do well. It challenges even the most competent professionals. But with the right tools, even fearful fiction writers like me can give it a good shot.

The Five Facts of Harry Potter

Do real writers use the Five Facts of Fiction? When I was in school and a teacher wanted me to do something a certain way, I often wanted to know how that way compared to the way people did the same thing in the real world outside of school. I have always felt that that was a reasonable thing for a student to want to know. After all, if part of the reason we go to school is to get us ready for life outside of it, it makes sense that we would want to learn about authentic ways of doing things, ways that real people really do them in the real world. So, do professional writers in the real world use something like Five Facts of Fiction to write their stories? For example, did J. K. Rowling use it to develop her Harry Potter stories? Probably not.

Every writer works differently. Writing is a very individual and often idiosyncratic activity. How writers write is a complex, at times even quirky, process filled with starts and stops and twists and turns of seemingly infinite variety. Even writers themselves are often at a loss to explain exactly how they do what they do. Many might even say they do things a little differently every time they start a new project. That's just the truth of writing: there's no one best way to do it. So where does that leave us with the Five Facts of Fiction? If real writers don't use it, why should you? Because it will help you get the same great results that real writers get.

Even though real writers may not use something like the Five Facts of Fiction, they still have to wrestle with all the same issues this strategy presents. They still have to consider their characters, what they want and why they do things, what happens to them, how they change, and the kind of world they inhabit. Most writers may not want to use a particular strategy to accomplish this, but they have to accomplish it just the same. And so do you. That's why I suggest that you try so many different strategies: they may not represent the real way real writers really write, but they are real enough to help you produce real writing.

So, could J. K. Rowling have used the Five Facts of Fiction to write Harry Potter? Though I know she didn't, I think she probably could have.

Fact #1: Fiction is all about character. Harry Potter: 12 years old, black tousled hair, bright green eyes, glasses, lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. Naïve, a bit shy at times, kind, compassionate, curious. Discovers that he is a wizard, and a rather famous one at that, when he is invited to attend the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. He is famous because, as an infant, he somehow survived an attack by Voldemort, the world's most powerful evil wizard.

Fact #2: Fiction is all about what a character wants. More than anything in the world, Harry wants a family. He is orphaned as an infant when his parents are killed by Voldemort. He is sent to live with his closest relatives, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, his uncle and aunt, and their exceedingly obnoxious son, Dudley. The Dursley's treat him badly and, through their abuse and neglect, he grows up to be a lonely, confused, and often depressed young boy.

Harry Potter, Cont.

Fact #3: Fiction is all about how a character gets or does not get what he or she wants. Does Harry get what he wants? In a way, yes he does. Harry joins the family of wizards at Hogwarts. During his first year as a member of Gryffindor House, he forms sibling-like bonds with Hermione Granger and the Weasley brothers. Hagrid, the school groundskeeper, is like an uncle or a big brother to Harry; Dumbledore takes on a fatherly role. Together, these people become the family Harry lost when Voldemort killed his parents.

Fact #4: Fiction is all about how a character changes. In the beginning, Harry is sullen and scared. He spends most of his time locked in a small closet beneath the basement stairs. When the Dursleys let him out, he is taunted and terrorized by their son Dudley. Harry is miserable and hopeless, a victim of his unfortunate circumstances.

At the end of the story, while sad to be returning temporarily to the home of his aunt and uncle, Harry is no longer helpless, hopeless, and hapless. In his year at Hogwarts he has gained tremendous self-confidence and a better understanding of who he is and what his life is all about.

The lesson of the story is this: If we're lucky enough to find out who we really are, and if we have the courage to claim our true power and embrace our destiny, we can take control of our world instead of letting it take control of us.

Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world an author creates. Who are the people (and animals) in this world? Muggles (regular humans), wizards, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Hermione, Ron, Voldemort, snooty professors, snotty cousins, a mean uncle and aunt, great friends, poor people, rich people, kind people, evil people, baby dragons, three-headed dogs, ghosts, and so on.

What are the important places in the story? The Dursley's home on Privet Drive, Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, Diagon Alley, the train station, the Quidditch field., Hagrid's cottage, the forest.

What are the important things? Magic, quidditch, spells and potions, a lightning-shaped scar, the sorcerer's stone, magic wands, flying brooms, a cape that makes you invisible, a mirror that shows you what you really want.

What ideas is the writer working with in this world: Magic, Loneliness, Friendship, Identity, Belonging, Evil, Treachery, Abuse, Competition, Learning, Tradition, Destiny.

What kind of world is this? This is a world where there's always some supernatural something or magical someone around to save the right people when they are in trouble. It's a world where courage is rewarded, friendship is valued, and good triumphs over evil.

Fact of Fiction #1

Fiction is all about character. Start with your character's name and age. What does this person look like? What is your character's life like and how does he or she feel about it? What does your character like to do? How does you character get along with others? And so on. Try to come up with as much information about your character as you can.

Example

Fiction is all about character. To come up with my character I thought about things from my childhood, but I also threw in some things from my brother's life and the lives of other kids I knew. (This is called making a "composite" character. It's one of the most common techniques fiction writers use.) A lot of it, however, is just made up.

JEREMY

Jeremy is 11 and in the 6th grade. He has black hair that's always messy because he doesn't like to take the time to brush it. He's short for his age. He seems really short compared to his friends at the middle school because he skipped second grade and he's actually a year younger than they are. He's very smart but he doesn't do that well in school. He thinks school is boring and pointless. He doesn't like most of his teachers. Actually, Jeremy doesn't like most adults. He doesn't think most of them are very smart and because of that he doesn't trust them.

In general, Jeremy is not a very happy kid. He's not unhappy exactly. It's just that he never seems very content with anything. He's very energetic and intense, always trying to make things better. But he can also be a bit grumpy.

Jeremy spends a lot of his time alone. He has friends but he doesn't see them that often because he likes to do different things than they do. Even at school he seems more or less on his own. He has a dog named Bishop that he really likes. He has trained Bishop to do all kinds of cool things and he's very proud of that.

Jeremy's favorite place to hang out is in his room. He has a huge room in the basement of his house which he has put a lot of effort into over the years to make it really cool. He has his own TV, a stereo system, and his prize possession: a really fast computer. His favorite thing to do on his computer is play chess.

Guidelines for Making Characters

A few guidelines that will help you even though you may not like them. Your character is the most important thing about your story. In fact, it's not too much of a stretch to say that the quality of your character determines the quality of your story. With that in mind, I have several recommendations for you. You may not like some of these "rules" but I urge you to follow them because they will help you learn this strategy faster and more effectively which in turn will make you a better fiction writer and make writing fiction more fun.

We often think of fiction as the kind of writing where we can make up anything we want. In some ways that's accurate but in other ways it's not. Your story isn't true, of course, and everybody knows that, but it does have to have the "ring" of truth about it, it has to seem plausible, as though it could be true even though we know it's not. These guidelines will help you accomplish that goal. I strongly recommend that you follow them.

Make your character a human being. In my experience, it's a lot easier to write well about human beings than it is to write about dogs, cats, unicorns, space aliens, and tap-dancing frogs. After all, you're a human being so you're bound to know a lot about being one, and you can bring that knowledge to your story. Not only is it a little easier to write about human beings, I think you learn more, too. So, I strongly recommend that you make your character a man, a woman, a boy, or a girl.

Make your character original. We all have our favorite characters from the books we've read, the movies and TV shows we've seen, and from stories we've been told. An easy thing to do would be to take one of these characters for your story. But these are the creations of other writers. You'll learn more — and have more fun, I think, — if you do the work of creating a character yourself. So, I strongly recommend that you make up your own character and that you not use a character created by someone else.

Make your character someone you are interested in. Writing a good story takes time. And most of that time is spent writing about your main character. Wouldn't you rather spend that time with someone interesting? Someone you are curious about? Someone whose life intrigues you in some way? If you create a character who seems boring to you, how do you think that character will seem to your audience? For these reasons, I strongly recommend that you make your character someone you are interested in.

Character Guidelines, Cont.

Make your character a type of person you would know a lot about. Creating a great character requires an incredible amount of detail. You have to know everything about this person in order to render their life successfully in words. This means you'll be much better off if you create a character who is similar to you or similar to other people you know well. For example, I could write a great story about a character who lives in Seattle, WA, who is around 40 years old, and who has a job helping teachers and kids learn about reading and writing. But I'd have a hard time writing about an 85-year old circus performer who lives in Tokyo, Japan. (If I did want to write about a type of person I don't know much about, I would have to do a lot of research before I got started.) So, I strongly recommend that you make your character a type of person you know a lot about.

Make your character a person who does not exist in the real world. Why not just take a good friend and make a character out of him or her? This person is a human being who has never been the subject of a book, movie, or TV show. This is someone you are interested in and know a lot about. It seems like a friend would make a perfect character. Using people you know for characters in a fiction story is very tempting. But it's not the safest thing to do because people often don't like to have their identities used in that way. Even if you ask a friend's permission and it is granted, this is still not a good idea. You should feel free to create a character who is similar to other people you know, or perhaps is a composite character formed by taking things from the lives of several different people, but don't create a character who is a copy of a single real person you know. I strongly recommend that you make your character a person who does not exist in the real world.

Make your character realistic. This can be a tough one. On the one hand, I've told you that your character shouldn't be a real person, and now I'm telling you to make your character realistic. What's that all about? Your character has to make sense to your audience. If you write about a five-year old boy who is seven feet tall and who plays professional basketball, that's going to be a hard thing for people to swallow. Even though your character is made up, he or she still has to be believable. So, I strongly recommend that you make your character realistic.

Make just one main character. Even though there are many stories that have more than one main character, your story will probably turn out better if you stick to the minimum. There's a lot of work to do in developing a character and you'll probably be better off putting all your energy into one rather than trying to do a good job with two or more. So, I strongly recommend that you make your character realistic.

Character Traits

The key to complex characters. To make your characters rich, complex, and compelling, you need to generate a lot of information about them. But where does this all this information come from and how do writers make it up? One thing writers do is consider different properties of human nature, things all people share in common and that therefore apply to all human characters in stories as well. These properties are referred to as character traits. There are many kinds character traits to think about, but here are some that I find useful.

Physical traits. This covers your character's name, age, height, weight, hair color, eye color, etc. Every character has hundreds of possible physical traits so the trick is picking out those that are most relevant to the story. A character's eye color or hair color may never factor into the plot in any way. But a character's age may play an important role if it makes doing something the character wants to do difficult or impossible. The important thing is not the trait itself, but how that trait affects the character and the story.

Social traits. This is about how your character interacts with other people. Who are your character's friends? Does your character have any at all? How does your character get along with family members? What about strangers? Is your character an introvert or an extrovert? And so on. How your character functions socially in your story will determine many things about the plot. For example, characters who aren't very social tend to be very independent as well. They do things on their own and this usually works out well for them until they come up against something they need help with.

Emotional traits. This is about how your character feels. What makes your character happy, sad, angry, or scared? What does your character do when he or she feels this way? How does your character feel most of the time? This is one of the most important aspects of your character because how your character feels will determine what your character does. It also includes your character's self-image, how your character feels about himself or herself.

Intellectual traits. How does your character think? What things does your character know a lot about? In what areas is your character confused or unaware? Is your character deliberate and analytical? Or casual and impulsive? How does your character react to new information, puzzles, ambiguity, and other mental challenges?

Philosophical traits. Even though we don't think about it much, everyone has a life philosophy, a set of beliefs about the way the world works upon which we base our actions and perceptions. What are your character's strongest beliefs about life and about the world in which he or she lives? How do those beliefs affect how your character acts and feels?

Tips for Making Better Characters

Give your character a quirk. A "quirk" is a peculiar behavior. A fancier word for it is "idiosyncracy." In the context of creating a character, it just means some little thing your character does that's very unusual. Think of a character who only makes right turns when he drives. Or how about a character who collects velcro. Or a character who, when he's out in public, occasionally picks up the handsets of pay phones for just a minute because he likes the sound of that recording that says, "If you'd like to make a call...". Usually, the best quirks are those that are funny and rather harmless. We all have little quirks; they make us who we are as individuals. And that's why we're interested in characters who have them, too.

Give your character a past. Everybody has a past, some set of memories, feelings, and things that have happened before the present moment. Your character has a past, too, and all these memories, feelings, and happenings affect how your character behaves. Maybe your character saw a scary TV show when he was little and that's why he's afraid of the dark. Or maybe your character got sick once eating a salad and now never eats vegetables. Good things happen in the past, too. Maybe your character has always been loved and treated well by her parents and that has made her optimistic, courageous, and confident. If you give your character a past, your readers will better understand your character's present and be more interested in your character's future.

Give your character a secret. I think it's fascinating when a character in a story knows something that no one else knows and doesn't want to tell. Sometimes it's a real secret like the name of a person who committed a crime in a mystery. But sometimes — and this is really my favorite — it's a secret that the character believes to be true or important but really isn't. (If you want to read an amazing example of this, check out *The Necklace* by Guy Du Maupassant.)

Give your character a habit. Like our quirks, our habits define us in certain interesting ways. Everybody has habits, little things we always do, and always in a certain way. Habits are interesting parts of our personalities because they represent involuntary behaviors — things we do without knowing we're doing them — that came about because we chose to do them so often at some point in the past. The habit you choose for your character should show your readers something important about your character's personality or circumstances. For example, having your character repeatedly and unconsciously check his watch during the work day might be a way to show that he doesn't like his job.

Give your character a fear. Fear is perhaps the strongest human emotion. And you can make your characters stronger by giving them fears, too. Fears usually come from the past. Sometimes something happened that makes us forever afraid. At other times — and these are the most interesting, I think, when it comes to character development — nothing real happened at all, we just thought something happened and allowed ourselves to be afraid of that. Readers love characters who have fears, struggle with them, and eventually overcome them.

Get to Know Your Character

Who is your character? How can you get to know someone who doesn't actually exist? That's a challenge all fiction writers have to deal with. In order to write a great story, writers have to know their characters well so they can figure out how their character will react in all kinds of situations. In order to know how someone will act, you have to get to know them really well, you have to know them even better than they know themselves.

Use the Topic T-Charts. The Topic T-Chart strategy is a great way to come up with lists of good topics to write about. But it's also a great way to learn about your character. To do this, instead of filling out the t-charts for you about your life, fill them out for your character. You'll learn about the things your character likes and hates, the typical and unusual experiences in your character's life, things your character does for fun and things your character only does because he or she has to, and things your character regrets and is proud of. With all those lists, you'll be well on your way to knowing your character inside and out.

Explore the back story. The back story is the story behind the story. Your character had a life before your story began. What was that life like? Think about things that might have happened to your character before your story actually starts. Why might those things be important? What effect did they have on your character? How might they be relevant to your story? Developing the back story is a more complicated version of giving your character a past. Instead of just thinking about one thing that might have happened, you actually think up a kind of "mini" story that could have taken place before your real story starts. One of the neat things that often happens when writers explore a character's back story is that they unexpectedly come up with new story ideas. In some case, the back story becomes the real story and the real story becomes a sequel.

The "I know you" game. There's a little game writers play to get to know their characters. It goes something like this: "I know you, Jeremy. You're the kind of person who is never satisfied no matter how things turn out." The idea is to act as though you're talking to your character, telling him or her something about their personality. The more things you can tell them, the better you know them, as long as they're true for that character. When I play the game, I imagine that my character will disagree with me if I'm not accurate, if I say something that doesn't fit. Here are three more statements about my character, Jeremy: (1) "I know you, Jeremy. You wouldn't trust another person if your life depended on it." (2) "I know you, Jeremy. You always think you're the smartest person in the room." (3) "I know you, Jeremy. Deep down inside you just want to be a regular kid like all your friends." When you play this game, you're actually "characterizing" your character. That is, you're identifying some quality or distinctive trait in his or her personality. The more thoroughly and accurately you can characterize your character, the more life-like your character will appear to your readers.

Fact of Fiction #2

Fiction is all about what your character wants. Your character wants one thing more than anything else in the world. It doesn't have to be something big or special that anyone would want. It could be something insignificant that only your character cares about. Whatever it is, it's something that will motivate your character to do almost anything to get it. And that's what makes your story interesting. So, what one thing does your character want more than anything else in the world?

Example

Fiction is all about what your character wants. I like to think about characters who are motivated by big dreams, especially if those dreams seem just a little bit impossible. I also like to think of things that catch characters by surprise, things they never knew they wanted but became fascinated with because of some unusual thing that happened to them.

WHAT DOES JEREMY WANT?

More than anything else, Jeremy wants to be the youngest world chess champion in history. He's been thinking about this ever since his Uncle Edward came to visit his family after a trip to Russia. Uncle Edward brought Jeremy a beautiful chess set as a present. Jeremy was only 8 at the time, but he was fascinated by the beautiful wooden board and the ornately carved chess pieces. He begged his uncle to teach him how to play and he found that he loved the game almost instantly. His uncle brought him some Russian chess magazines and books, too. And even though Jeremy couldn't read the language, he studied the chess games carefully, playing them out move by move on his board pretending that he was first one player and then the other.

Jeremy has never told anyone about his dream. He doesn't tell anyone because he's afraid they'll laugh at him and think he's weird. He lives in a small town and nobody he knows there is famous, and hardly anyone plays chess. He's very anxious about his dream. For one thing, he's 11 now and that means he only has another 11 or 12 years left to break the record. He has followed the careers of other famous chess players and he knows he's way behind their pace. That's why he's always down in his basement room studying chess on his computer. He practices all the time and keeps thinking that when he becomes famous, everyone in the town will be in awe of him.

Tips on Character Motivation

The money thing. Sometimes we think that what our characters want is to be rich, to have a lot of money, so much money that they don't know what to do with it. Maybe we think they want to be the richest person in the world or something like that. That's a perfectly normal thing for a character to want, but it doesn't make for a very interesting story. Instead, think about what your character wants the money for. What does your character want to do with the money when he or she gets it? That's what your character *really* wants. And that's what you should be writing your story about. Who knows? Maybe your character will figure out a way to be successful without needing all that money.

The power problem. Maybe your character wants to be the President of the United States or the CEO of the world's largest multi-national corporation. Maybe your character wants to own an island to rule over and do with whatever he or she decides. This is power and everyone seems to want it at one time or another. But just as with money, it's not the power people really want, it's the power to do things that motivates them. So, if what your character wants is some kind of power, think about what your character wants the power for and write about that instead.

Impossible dreams. What if your character wants something that is impossible? Maybe your character is a little boy who wishes he could turn into a dog. Maybe your character wants to grow up to be nine feet tall so she can be the world's greatest basketball player. What do you do with this? I have two suggestions. The first is simply to pick a more realistic motivation for your character. This will be easier to write about and will probably produce a better story that more of your readers can relate to. The other way to handle this situation is to use it as something that only occurs in your reader's mind. Everyone thinks fantastical thoughts from time to time and characters who think them frequently can be very entertaining. (If you'd like a great example of a wonderful character with a rich fantasy life, check out James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Middy.)*

More than one thing. Can a character want more than one thing? Yes, of course. But that makes writing your story more complicated. In all likelihood, you'll be writing a fairly short story here. Maybe just a few pages. For each thing your character wants, you've got a lot of explaining to do. There's also the chance that your story could become very unfocused as your character rushes around from here to there in search of all kinds of different things. Give yourself and your readers a break. Just as I recommended that you have only one main character, I also strongly recommend that your character want only one thing.

My character doesn't know. It's possible that your story is about a person who doesn't know what he or she wants at all. This is a common theme in literature and in life and it's just about as hard to write as it is to live. If you're up for the challenge, give it a try. But don't feel bad if you decide eventually to go back to something more conventional.

Things and Feelings

Bur what does your character *really* want? (I mean *really* really want?) It's fair to say that human beings are rather complex animals when it comes to the matter of what we want out of our lives. In addition to the normal things that all animals seem to want, things like food, shelter, and safety from predators, human beings want things that have to do with how other people feel about them and how they feel about themselves. For example, most people want to be well-liked and respected. Some want nothing more than to relax and enjoy themselves. Still others want to contribute to the world around them by giving their time or their money to support organizations or causes they care about. These kinds of wants are a little more complicated. For one thing, it's not like a person can order them at a restaurant: "I'd like an order of respect, please. Oh, and give me a side of contribution, too." The simple truth is that what most people want is to feel happy about themselves, their lives, and the world around them.

Where does happiness come from? Happiness seems to come from many other different feelings, the types and sources of which differ from person to person. Some people are happiest when they experience feelings of freedom and independence. Others are happiest when they experience feelings of love, connection, and community. Still others seek out feelings of accomplishment, recognition, peacefulness, intensity, risk, playfulness, and the list goes on and on. Deep down inside, at the core of who we are, we don't want *things*, we want *feelings.* It's not the circumstances of our lives that make us happy or sad, it's the feelings we have about those circumstances that makes the difference.

For every thing there's a feeling. For every thing that a person could want there's a feeling that goes with it. And it is this feeling that represents the true desire. For example, have you ever heard of someone who got something they thought they wanted but then wasn't happy when they got it? Sure you have. It happens all the time. You've also heard of people who didn't get the thing they wanted but ended up happy anyway. In the end, feelings are more important to us than things. And it's the same with characters in stories.

What characters *really* really want. When you think about the one thing your character wants more than anything else in the world, think also about the feelings your character wants to get from it. In my story, Jeremy wants to be the world's youngest chess champion. But what he really wants is to feel special and unique. He also wants the feeling of being recognized by everyone he knows as a smart and accomplished person. But maybe, deep down inside, all he really wants is a feeling of being liked by the people around him. Maybe the thing that drives him so hard is his desire to be close to other people. But the only way he knows how to do that is to become famous. To me, it's this kind of thinking about a character that makes a story truly great. So when you think about the things your characters want, think also about the feelings they want from those things. Understanding this will do more to improve your story than almost anything else.

Fact of Fiction #3

Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants. This is the plot of your story. There are two things you have to figure out: (1) Does your character get what he or she wants? This can be a simple "yes" or "no" answer. And, (2) How does that happen? What your character wants creates the problem or conflict in the story. What sequence of events leads to the resolution of that conflict?

Example

Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants. The kinds of stories that often interest me are ones where the main character doesn't get what he or she wants, but gets something else valuable in return. That's the kind of story I want to work on here.

DOES JEREMY GET WHAT HE WANTS?

No, Jeremy does not get what he wants. He does not become the youngest world chess champion in history. In fact, he quits playing chess altogether. Here's what happens:

Jeremy's Uncle Edward sends him an e-mail to let him know that the United States Junior Chess Open is going to be held in the big city just a few hours away from the small town where Jeremy lives. Uncle Edward tells Jeremy that this is an opportunity for him to play against the best young chess players in the country. Jeremy has never played in a tournament before but he's beaten almost every other kid in town. In fact, he's even beaten most of the adults, too. So he decides to go to the tournament.

He practices intensely in the months before the tournament. He gets better and better at playing against his computer. Actually, he makes so much progress that when he and his parents leave for the tournament, Jeremy is pretty sure he's going to win.

When they get to the city, Jeremy is fascinated by all the people he meets and the cool things to do. He hangs out with the other chess players and makes new friends. He also stays up really late two nights in a row before the tournament starts.

When the tournament starts, Jeremy is very tired. He's so tired that he plays badly, losing all his games. Because of this, he decides to quit playing chess forever. So he never becomes world champion. But he doesn't regret it either.

Tips on Plot Development

Verisimilitude. (Now there's a fancy Latin word for ya.) There's a strange contradiction every writer has to deal with when writing fiction: on the one hand, the story is completely made up, on the other, it has to have elements of truth in to make sense to the reader. What does this mean exactly? It means your story has to have "verisimilitude." Verisimilitude is a fancy Latin word I didn't learn about until my third year of college. It simply means "something that has the appearance of being true or real." When you think about what characters will do in your story, you must come up with things that make sense for who those characters are, what they want, and the world they live in. Once you establish the basic premise of your story — the nature of your characters and their conflicts, the particulars of your setting, etc. — your readers form expectations that your story must live up to regarding how things will proceed. Most of these expectations come from what readers know about life. So, in order to be successful, your story doesn't have to be true, but it does have to be true to life.

Don't make the plot too complicated. There's a temptation when you're sketching out the plot of a story to make it long and complicated with many surprising twists and turns. We all want to do this because this is what we experience in the books we love to read. But here's something important to consider: the average novel is 100,000 words long; many are over 200,000. Do you really want to write this much? Most writers don't. Think of writing a short story instead of a novel and plan your plot accordingly. Keep things tight. You can bring in a surprise here and there but you probably can't develop several sub-plots or take any significant excursions from the main storyline. In general, it is much better to have just a few important scenes with lots of detail than it is to have a long, drawn out story with dozens of things happening that aren't closely connected or well explained.

Is it funny or is it silly? I have noticed a tendency on the part of some writers to put crazy things into the plots of their stories. My hunch is that they are trying to be funny when they do this, but they end up being silly instead. Funny is good, everybody likes funny. Silly is not good. When you put silly things in your story, your readers get annoyed; they feel like you are wasting their time. Sometimes it's hard to know if something you're doing is funny or silly. Here's a good way to tell the difference: When you do something funny, people laugh at you. When you do something silly, you laugh at yourself.

Use the Transition-Action-Details strategy. A great strategy to use for developing the plot of your story is Transition-Action-Details. Start in the first "Action" box with the first scene in your story. Put the last scene in the last "Action" box. Then fill up the middle. When you have all the scenes you want in just the right order, add a couple of important details and perhaps a simple transition or two.

Plotting Out the Plot Of Your Story

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS

Example

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
In the fall,	Jeremy learns from his Uncle Edward that the U.S. Junior Chess Open tournament is being held in a city just a few hours from where he lives.	• Jeremy is not sure he's good enough but his Uncle encourages him. • He doesn't think his parents will let him go.
A few days later,	Jeremy talks with his parents to ask if he can play in the tournament and if they will take him to the city to be in it.	• They ask him a lot of questions about it. It's during spring break. • His father thinks it's OK but his mom isn't sure. Then they decide to make it a family vacation together.
Over spring break,	Jeremy drives with his mom and dad to the tournament.	• Jeremy is very excited. He talks with his parents about the tournament for the whole drive. • Jeremy's parents talk about all the neat things in the city.
When they get to the hotel,	Jeremy meets many of the other kids who have travelled from all over the country for the tournament.	• It's fun for him to meet new people. • Some of the kids talk with him about chess but mostly they just talk about normal kid things.
[No Transition]	Jeremy loves the city. He stays up late hanging out with other kids he meets there and doing fun things he doesn't normally do.	• He loves the restaurants and the big stores downtown. • He stays up way past midnight in the hotel arcade with a group of friends he's just made.
The next day,	Jeremy loses all his games at the tournament, decides to quit playing chess completely, and give up his dream of being world champion.	• He's too tired to play very well and he's really nervous. • He's shocked that he's playing so badly and sad that he's losing. • He leaves that afternoon without staying for the awards ceremony.

Fact of Fiction #4

Fiction is all about how your character changes. The kind of changes in characters that we're looking for here are changes on the inside, changes in how characters feel about themselves, their lives, and their world. What is your character like at the beginning of your story? How is your character different at the end? What lesson does your character learn?

Example

Fiction is all about how your character changes. My favorite kind of change is the change that takes place when a character realizes something about himself that he had been ignoring. In my story, my character realizes he's been looking for the wrong thing all the time and decides to give up something important in order to have a chance of getting it.

HOW DOES JEREMY CHANGE?

At the beginning of the story, Jeremy is lonely, impatient, competitive, occasionally grumpy, and a little arrogant. He's very focused on his long term goal of becoming a chess champion and he feels that anything that isn't related to achieving that goal, like school or friendships or normal kid activities, is a waste of time. He spends his time playing chess on his computer and rejecting just about everything else in his life.

At the end of the story, Jeremy is sad to be giving up chess and also a bit shocked that he feels like giving it up after only his first tournament. But in a strange way, he knows that it's the right thing for him to do. After making the decision to quit, he starts to feel relieved, as though a big weight has been lifted from his shoulders. He realizes that he was putting too much pressure on himself all the time. He also feels hopeful that now he'll be able to spend more time with friends and do some of the fun things they all do. He still enjoys playing chess and he knows he can play it as a hobby all his life. But he also knows that he wants to do other things, too.

The lesson he learns is that being the best at something isn't the most important thing. In trying to be the best chess player, he realizes how much he was giving up and how unhappy he was even though being a good chess player made him feel proud and different from other kids. In the end, he'd rather just be a normal 6th grader and spend time with his friends.

Tips on How Characters Change

Think "inside" as well as "outside". When we think of how our own lives change, we often think of things like being older, looking different, living in a different city, or going to a different school. These are the obvious things and they do represent important changes for us. But when it comes to writing a great story, these kinds of changes are not the most important. Being taller, playing a new sport, getting a part-time job, these are changes on the "outside," they represent differences in the external circumstances or our lives. But more important changes take place on the "inside." These changes are all about how we feel, what we believe, how we think. The way I see it, it works like this: Because of who we are and the kind of world we live in, there are things we want. In the course of trying to get these things, we go through a variety of experiences. Because what we want is important to us, the experiences of trying to get it are important to us, too. As we go through important experiences, we learn new things, and as we learn new things, we change: we end up thinking differently and feeling differently — on the inside — about ourselves, our lives, and the world we live in. This is the kind of change in your character that makes for a great story.

How people are on the inside. We use many different words to describe how people are on the inside: temperament, mood, personality, disposition, state of mind, etc. When you think about how your character changes, these are the things you're trying to describe. Often, you will find yourself using "feeling" words to talk about these things. When it comes to thinking about how your character changes, you'll want to think about your character changing in some way on the inside. Maybe your character will become happier or more trusting or more hopeful. Perhaps your character starts out with these good feelings and by the end, he or she feels scared or confused. Characters don't have to feel better, they just have to feel different. And that difference has to be important to the character, to you, and to your readers.

This is where the meaning is. If you write your characters well, your readers will identify with them. This means that they will, at least in part, feel the same way your characters do throughout your story. This is why people find stories meaningful, full of importance, value, and inner significance. Some people might argue — and I would be one of them — that this is the most important part of the story. I think that one of the reasons we all like stories so much is that we love to see how characters change on the inside as they go through their lives. I think we like this because it gives us ideas about how to go through our own lives.

Use the Tell-Show strategy to "show" the change. You could tell your audience about how your character changes just by saying something like, "Tyler felt sad at the beginning, but now he felt happy." That's short and to the point, but it isn't very effective. It's better if you can "show" your audience the change instead. To do this, use the Tell-Show strategy. Put your character's feelings on the "Tell" side and then, on the "Show" side, describe your character doing something (or not doing something) that represents how your character feels.

Personality

What makes a person a person? It's person-ality. The characters in your story are supposed to represent real people. They're not real people, of course. They're just words on a page. But somehow they have to end up being more than just words to your readers. To turn your characters from words into people, you have to give them personality. And to give your characters personality, you have to think creatively about what your characters do, say, and think, and ultimately, how they feel.

Characters do things. Because of a character's personality, he or she will do certain things under certain circumstances. For example, a character who is "mercurial" (volatile; given to sudden and unexpected swings in mood toward anger) might react wildly to a situation when under stress and not react at all in the same situation if they feel safe and calm.

Characters say things. What characters say, and how they see it, often gives us a window into their personality. A character who is "pessimistic" (someone who tends to expect the worst, to see things negatively) might say something like this, "I'll never pass that math test no matter how hard I try. I'm going to flunk for sure and then I won't graduate. I won't go to college and I won't get a good job. I'll end up being one of those telemarketer guys sitting all night in a cubicle making phone calls to nice families who are just sitting down to dinner and getting yelled at because nobody likes to have their dinner interrupted especially by some high school dropout who couldn't pass math. Yeah, that's what's going to happen to me. If I don't pass this math test — which I won't — I'm going to spend the rest of my life getting yelled at."

Characters think things. Often, characters will do or say things but inside they're thinking something different. A character who is "apprehensive" (anxious or fearful about the future) might act as if she's really excited about the upcoming spring dance when, in fact, she's dreading it. She might be energetic and upbeat when she's talking with her friends about what they're all going to wear, but inside she's feeling scared and having stomach aches because she's so stressed out about it. She finds herself dwelling on it all the time. She can't sleep or concentrate on her school work. And it's all because she accidentally agreed to go with two different boys and she's too embarrassed to tell anyone about it or ask for help solving the problem.

Characters feel a certain way most of the time. Ultimately, it's how a character feels that matters. But how do characters really feel? Don't their feelings fluctuate just like those of real people? Of course they do. So, to establish a character's personality, we have to show a pattern of feelings. And for that, we need to give our readers many different chances to see how our characters feel in many different situations. Just like you can't get to know someone based on one emotional reaction to one thing you said in one conversation, readers can't get to know a character on such slight evidence either. They need to see how characters feel over time, many times, and in the context of many different sets of circumstances.

Do-Say-Think-Feel

DO
What does your character do?

SAY
What does your character say?

THINK
What does your character think?

FEEL
How does your character feel?

Example

DO

What does your character do?

When his teachers ask him to do his work, he just ignores them if he thinks it's boring.

He spends a lot of time by himself on his computer in his basement room.

When his parents ask him how he's feeling, he just says "Fine" and doesn't want to talk to them about it. Sometimes he doesn't even answer, he just goes to his room.

SAY

What does your character say?

"This assignment is stupid. When will I ever have to do something like this in my life?"

"I'm tired of spending time with my friends. They're so boring. All they like to do is ride bikes and go to the mall or the arcade. Who cares about that stuff?"

"The smartest people in the world are chess players."

THINK

What does your character think?

He thinks he's unusually intelligent and that most people just don't understand him.

He thinks he's a lot smarter than most people, including most of the adults he knows.

He thinks that the world is a tough and lonely place and that he'll only be happy if he's famous and successful.

FEEL

How does your character feel?

Most of the time, Jeremy feels like he's smarter and better than other people. He's arrogant and competitive, and he's not above telling people that he isn't interested in what they have to say. He doesn't trust people, especially adults, and so he never shares how he feels with his parents or asks them for help. Because of all this, he feels lonely, like he's on his own and there's no one to help him with anything.

Fact of Fiction #5

Fiction is all about a world that you create. The world of a story is made up four things: people, places, things, and ideas. Who are the important people in your story? In what places does the action of the story occur? What things are important in your story? What ideas are expressed in this world? What kind of world is this? (“This is a world where...”)

Example

Fiction is all about a world that you create. The world I'm trying to create for my story looks to Jeremy, my main character, as though it isn't a very friendly or interesting place. Then, later in the story, as he begins to change, his perceptions of the world change, too, and it becomes more pleasant, welcoming, and fun. The world was this way all the time, of course. Jeremy just didn't see it that way. For most of the story, however, we see the world through his eyes.

JEREMY'S WORLD

PEOPLE: Jeremy's mom and dad; his Uncle Edward; other kids at school; teachers; other kids and their families at the big chess tournament; Jeremy's dog, Bishop. All of these characters are "helper" characters. There are no characters in the story who work against Jeremy. But he thinks they're all against him in some way. Even the kids who beat him at the chess tournament are helping him, in a kind of opposite way, to figure out what he really wants and how to be happy.

PLACES: Jeremy's basement room; upstairs at his house; at the dinner table in the kitchen; at the park where Jeremy goes with his dog; at Jeremy's school; in the van when they drive to the city; at the hotel where they are having the chess tournament; in the tournament hall.

THINGS: Chess, chess books and chess magazines, the Internet, e-mail, Jeremy's computer, his TV set and stereo, the homework Jeremy never wants to do.

IDEAS: Competition, loneliness, ambition, frustration, trust, stress, hope for the future.

THIS IS A WORLD WHERE... You don't always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need.

Tips on Making a Better World

Three kinds of minor characters. In addition to your main character, most stories have three types of minor characters: (1) Characters who help the main character in some way (I call them "helpers"); (2) Characters who hinder the main character in some way (I call them "hinderers"); and (3) Incidental characters who neither help nor hinder the main character but need to be included so the story makes sense (I call them "incidentals"). If you're up for a challenge, think about creating a character who shifts during the story. Maybe they start out as someone who hinders the main character but end up helping him in the end. Maybe someone who seems like an incidental character at first, ends up being the real bad guy. (If you've ever seen Scooby-Doo, you know what I'm talking about.) There are lots of possibilities here and, if you can pull it off, readers love to be surprised by characters this way.

Places have meaning. Most stories have scenes in several different places. You should always make sure you describe each of these places in some way for your readers. Don't assume that they will know exactly what you mean if you just say "the school" or "Patricia's house." What readers often do when they hear things like this is make a picture in their mind of something from their own life. But that's like letting someone else write part of your story. (It saves you some work but you can't take the credit and, more importantly, your ersatz collaborator rarely puts in a good effort.) The thing to be aware of is this: places are meaningful to people. If you say that a character is walking by a river, to you that may mean they're headed for a relaxing and contemplative afternoon jaunt. But a reader thinking about a white water raft trip or a picture of Niagra Falls will develop a completely different (and incorrect) set of associations. Places have meaning to people. Describe them thoroughly so the meaning they get is the meaning you intend.

Things have meaning, too. Things in your story (important objects, entities, and activities) can mean things to your readers, too. Sometimes, especially in horror stories, authors use things as "symbols" so that they come to represent ideas for the reader. For example, a writer might use a description of a frail, withered tree to stand for the idea of getting old and reaching the end of one's life. If a writer just does this once or twice, it's called "symbolism." If the whole story is a kind of symbol, it's called "allegory." For fun examples of this, read the stories of Edgar Allan Poe.

What's in a name? A quick and easy way to convey meaning to your readers about things and places is to pick the right name. For example, if I'm writing about a business executive who controls a large company through the computer on his desk, I might want to give it a brand name like "PowerCenter 6000." Or, if I want to suggest that the employee lounge his company provides is dark, dirty, and located inconveniently at the bottom of the building three floors underground, I might have people in the story refer to it as "the dungeon." This tends to work best only when writers are very subtle about it. (And, just so you know, neither of the examples I gave here were very subtle.)

More Tips for a Better World

Ideas are themes. When I was growing up, I thought writers wrote fiction just because it was fun to tell stories. It is fun to tell stories, but that's not the main reason why writers write fiction. Writers write fiction for the same reason write anything: they want to communicate important ideas to their readers. In most types of non-fiction writing, it's pretty easy to tell what ideas writers are working with. If the title of a magazine article is "How to Train Your Pet Lizard," you don't have to do a lot of head scratching to figure out what ideas the writer is working with. But if you're reading a book with a title like "To Kill a Mockingbird," you can bet there's more to it than tips on engineering the demise of long-tailed gray and white fowl with a talent for vocal mimicry. In fact, there might not be much in the book about mockingbirds at all. Who knows?

When writer's write fiction, they don't just come out and tell you what ideas they are working with. They want to tell you a story and let you figure out the ideas by yourself. They do it this way for several reasons: (1) People tend to be more affected by something if they encounter it in a story they like; (2) People tend to remember things better if they figure them out for themselves; (3) Many important ideas like love, honor, courage, destiny, etc., are hard to explain except by example; and (4) People are more apt to listen to serious things that others have to say if the message is wrapped in something entertaining.

The technical word for an idea when it appears in a work of fiction is "theme." Themes are represented in stories by characters, actions, objects, places, and other elements. For example, in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Telltale Heart," the main character keeps hearing the beating heart of the old man he has just murdered. Some people interpret this as representing the main character's guilt. If you were one of those people, you could say that guilt is a theme in the story, it's one idea the author wanted to talk about.

Themes are usually abstract concepts (as opposed to concrete things you can hear, touch, see, feel, or taste) and are often related to human emotions: love, hatred, good, evil, jealousy, honor, justice, revenge, sacrifice, heroism, defeat, and so on. A writer may wish to write about a single theme or the story may include several. Some themes may be apparent to some readers, while other readers simply don't "see" them at all. The act of discovering a theme is called "interpretation." In this case, interpreting a story for a theme involves finding examples in the text that portray certain story elements and showing how those elements stand for a particular idea.

What kind of world is this? Is it possible to sum up a world in a single sentence? Not the real world. But sometimes, an author knows the world of a story so well, he or she can think of a single thought that describes just how it is. Try to complete this sentence: "This is a world where..." If you know the world of your story, you'll probably be able to do it.

Something Else You Should Know

What's the difference between fiction and non-fiction? That's an easy one, right? Everyone knows that fiction is false and non-fiction is true. But is it really that simple? Take the newspaper, for instance. By all accounts, newspaper journalism is considered to be non-fiction. But is everything you read in the newspaper true? Hardly. I think that most journalists work diligently to be as accurate as they can, but often what they report differs from the truth in ways large and small. And what about historical fiction? Is that false? Some parts certainly are. But others probably aren't. And where do you put something like advertising?

It seems that what we've heard all our lives about the difference between fiction and non-fiction is itself a fiction. I wouldn't call it wrong per se. After all, it is a widely held belief, one that even this argument, however persuasive it may be, is unlikely to alter. But to call fiction false and non-fiction true is to tell only part of the story, and not even the best part at that.

As I see it, the difference between fiction and non-fiction is this: Non-fiction is all about the world we live in; fiction is all about a world an author creates. (Or, with catchier phrasing and the proper emphasis: Non-fiction is all about *the* world; fiction is all about *a* world.) True or not, news stories in the town paper are all about the world its readers live in. And a novel — even the most realistic novel set in the same town in the present day — is not about that world at all. It's about a special world, a world that is not the one its readers live in but something separate, a world unto itself, created by the author exclusively for the story. It may be just like the real world, but it's a different world entirely. It's the world of the book.

Look for the truth in fiction. This way of looking at the difference between fiction and non-fiction is important to me because it means that we can find truth in fiction if we look for it. If we believe that fiction is false, we may miss some of the most important things about a book simply because we won't be looking for them. And, as we do with most things that we think are made up, we won't take fiction very seriously. After all, what's the point if it's all just a lie created solely for harmless entertainment?

Beware the falsity in non-fiction. The other reason this way of looking at the difference between fiction and non-fiction is so important to me is because it means that we shouldn't automatically believe that everything we find in a non-fiction medium is true. This is extremely important because non-fiction media are often used to shape the opinions of society as a whole.

What's the point of all this? I'm not saying this so you'll believe everything you read in fiction and disbelieve all non-fiction. I'm simply saying that truth is not related to genre as so many of us seem to have been taught. I want you to be a talented critical reader. I want you to determine the truth of things for yourself, to challenge the accuracy of everything you come across, whether you're reading Redwall or the Wall Street Journal.

The Five Facts of Fiction

1 Fiction is all about character.

2 Fiction is all about what your character wants.

3 Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.

4 Fiction is all about how your character changes.

5 Fiction is all about a world that you create.

Example

1 Fiction is all about character.

Jeremy, 11, 6th grade. Messy black hair. Short for his age. Smart but doesn't do well in school. Thinks school is boring. Doesn't like his teachers. Doesn't like most adults. Not a happy kid. Never seems content. Energetic and intense, always trying to make things better. Can also be grumpy. Spends time alone. Has a dog named Bishop. Has a huge room in the basement. Has his own TV, a stereo system, and a really fast computer. His favorite thing to do on his computer is play chess.

2 Fiction is all about what your character wants.

Wants to be youngest world chess champion. He's been thinking about this since he was 8 when his Uncle Edward came to visit his family after a trip to Russia and gave him a chess set as a present. Jeremy has never told anyone about his dream. He doesn't tell anyone because he's afraid they'll laugh at him and think he's weird. He's anxious about his dream. He practices all the time and keeps thinking that when he becomes famous, everyone in the town will be in awe of him.

3 Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.

Does not get what he wants. Goes to the city for the United States Junior Chess Open. Stays up late hanging out with other players two nights in a row before the tournament starts. When the tournament starts, he's so tired and nervous that he plays badly, losing all his games. Because of this, he decides to quit playing chess forever.

4 Fiction is all about how your character changes.

At the beginning, Jeremy is lonely, impatient, competitive, occasionally grumpy, and a little arrogant. He's focused on his long term goal of becoming a chess champion. At the end, he's sad but relieved to be out from under all the pressure. He's hopeful, too, that he'll now be able to have more fun. The lesson he learns is that being the best at something isn't the most important thing. He'd rather feel more like other kids so he can have more friends and do more regular kid things.

5 Fiction is all about a world that you create.

PEOPLE: Jeremy's mom and dad; his Uncle Edward; kids at school; teachers; kids at the tournament; Jeremy's dog, Bishop. PLACES: Jeremy's basement room; upstairs at his house; at the park where Jeremy goes with his dog; at Jeremy's school; at the hotel where they are having the chess tournament. THINGS: Chess, the Internet, e-mail, Jeremy's computer, the homework Jeremy never wants to do. IDEAS: Competition, loneliness, ambition, frustration, trust, stress, hope for the future.

Five Facts of Fiction

1 Fiction is all about character.

2 Fiction is all about what your character wants.

3 Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.

Five Facts of Fiction

4 Fiction is all about how your character changes.

5 Fiction is all about a world that you create.

Five Facts of Fiction

1 Fiction is all about character.

PHYSICAL TRAITS: Name? Age? Hair color? Eye color? Other physical characteristics? Affects of these on character and situation?

EMOTIONAL TRAITS: How does your character feel?

SOCIAL TRAITS: Interactions with friend? family? strangers?

PHILOSOPHICAL TRAITS: Beliefs about self? life? world?

INTELLECTUAL TRAITS: How does your character think?

2 Fiction is all about what your character wants.

THING: What one thing does your character want more than anything else in the world?

REASON: Why does your character want this?

FEELING: What feeling does your character want from getting this thing?

3 Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.

Does your character get it? Yes___ No___ How does this happen?

Five Facts of Fiction

4 Fiction is all about how your character changes.

BEGINING: What is your character like (feelings, personality, temperament, disposition, mood, state of mind, etc.) at the beginning?

END: What is your character like (feelings, personality, temperament, disposition, mood, state of mind, etc.) at the end?

LESSON: What lesson does your character learn? What lesson will the audience learn from your character?

5 Fiction is all about a world that you create.

PEOPLE: Other characters in the story? Helper characters? Hinderer characters? Incidental characters?

PLACES: What are the locations where the story's important scenes take place?

THINGS: What objects, entities, and activities are important in the story?

IDEAS: What concepts, messages, and themes will you be working with in this story?

THIS IS A WORLD WHERE...

Starting Your Story

How do you start a piece of fiction? You can use the Five Facts of Fiction strategy to plan out very intricate and fascinating stories. But all the great ideas in the world won't help you if you can't write the first sentence. Often, even when writers have a thoroughly developed sense of their characters and plot, they don't quite know how to begin. I think this is because there are so many choices. Works of fiction begin in so many different ways. There are literally no rules, or even vague guidelines, regarding how best to go about it. Be that as it may, you can always take the position that beginning a work of fiction is no different than beginning any other type of writing. The same requirements apply: you still have to come up with something that will catch your readers' attention and make them want to read more. If you were to take this position, you would be essentially correct. Beginning one kind of writing is more or less like beginning any other. And so, you should feel free to use any of the lead strategies you've already learned. But what if you want to start with an approach that is uniquely suited to fiction? What if you want to learn some new lead strategies based on the information you just generated for your story through the Five Facts of Fiction? If so, read on. For each of the five facts, there's a specific lead strategy you can use to begin your piece.

A character beginning. In this beginning, based on Fact of Fiction #1, you start out with a detailed description of your main character. This is a very common type of beginning, one you've probably read more times than you can count.

A motivation beginning. Sometimes it's interesting to start by describing what your character wants. This allows you to set up the conflict in the story right away. This can be attractive to your readers because it gives them the essential information they need to understand what your story will be about.

A plot beginning. How can you start out your story by telling your readers the plot? Well, you can't. But you can use the plot to create a classic type of fiction beginning using a technique called "foreshadowing." To foreshadow something is to give a hint of what is to come. You can often entice your readers into reading on by giving them just a peak at how things will turn out in the end without giving it all away.

A "change" beginning. You obviously can't show the change your character is going to go through right at the beginning. That wouldn't make much sense even as foreshadowing. But you can describe your character's personality in such a way that when your readers reach the end, they see the stark contrast between the way your character ended up and the way he or she started out.

A "world" beginning. Another very common beginning involves describing the setting or the world where they story takes place. This is also one of the easiest beginnings to write.

Eddie Takes Off

1 Fiction is all about character.

Eddie is in high school. He's shy and a little awkward. He has a special ability that most people don't understand. He's always being taunted, teased, and even beaten up by his nemesis, Alex Johnson because of something that happened between Alex and Eddie when they were five. Eddie feels lonely most of the time, like he doesn't fit in. He has a couple of friends, Max and Jerry, who are just about as awkward and unpopular as he is.

2 Fiction is all about what your character wants.

Eddie wants Jane, a girl he met in 9th grade, to like him. He's tried to ask her out but he always gets too nervous. They see each other at school from time to time, and they even have some classes together, but Eddie never knows what to say to her. Eddie wants to go out with Jane but really he just wants someone to like him and accept for the unusual person that he is.

3 Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.

Eddie does get what he wants. At a party the night of the senior prom, Eddie rescues Jane from her date, Alex Johnson. Alex and Jane are having an argument when Eddie rushes in to break things up. Alex gets scared because of what happened between he and Eddie back when they were five. Eddie leaves the party with Jane.

4 Fiction is all about how your character changes.

In the beginning, Eddie is lonely, shy, and awkward. He feels sorry himself most of the time. He's a victim who is always getting teased and picked on. At the end of the story, Eddie suddenly becomes courageous enough to challenge Alex. He realizes that he can use his special abilities to get what he wants. The lesson of the story is that some things are so important, they're worth fighting for.

5 Fiction is all about a world that you create.

PEOPLE: Eddie's mom and dad, Mrs. Johnson and her son Alex, Jane, Eddie's friends Max and Jerry. PLACES: Eddie's home, the Johnson's back yard, the high school, the party after the senior prom. THINGS: School work, fighting, a blue truck, flying, parties. IDEAS: Being special, being misunderstood, loneliness, anger, courage, acceptance.

Eddie Takes Off

Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a bit of a social problem. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnsons' lawn, Eddie's parents had treated his airborne peculiarity as something of a childish whim. "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know..." said his mother. For the young Eddie, flying was just another discovery about his developing body, like learning that he could reach out his arm and ring the bell on his cradle railing, or finding that he loved the taste of peas. The first time his parents came into the nursery and found Eddie hovering a foot or two off the floor it came as a bit of a shock. But, after all, parents are forever discovering special little things about their children. Eddie's mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."

In fact, Eddie's flying soon became an annoyance to his parents. Broken light fixtures, crayon marks on the ceilings, and lost objects that had to be retrieved from the tops of bookcases soon exasperated them. Once when Eddie was three, his rather senile grandmother came for a visit. As she was sitting in her favorite armchair watching TV, Eddie, who had been playing behind the chair, appeared in the air over his grandmother, ready to drop a rubber ball on her graying, addled head. His father shot him a look so full of "No!" that Eddie desisted at once and sulkily spent the rest of the day firmly seated on the carpet. As the months and years passed, Eddie learned to be reticent about his ability in order to avoid parental displeasure; this had the added benefit of not provoking awkward questions from grandparents and visiting relatives. Eddie's mother and father also took certain prudent precautions such as a gentle restraining hand during diaper changing and remembering to close the sun roof of the family car when Eddie was inside.

And then, shortly before his fifth birthday, Eddie's mother received a phone call from her neighbor three houses down. Mrs. Johnson was offering to throw a little birthday bash for Eddie's fifth with some of the neighborhood kids. Eddie's mother eagerly accepted, and the two agreed how wonderful it would be for Eddie and the Johnsons' five-year-old, Alex, to make friends. Eddie's mother was secretly pleased at the invitation for another reason: Mr. Johnson was on the community council, and the Johnsons lived in the biggest, nicest house in the cul-de-sac. This might be a great social opportunity for the parents as well as the children.

On the big day, Mrs. Johnson met Eddie and his mother at the Johnsons' front door and showed them to the back yard after a brief tour of the house. Eddie and Alex, after some preliminary shyness, got down to the serious business of playing with a set of toy trucks, and eventually seven other youngsters arrived, escorted by various parents and babysitters. Eddie was treated to a large assortment of presents and Mrs. Johnson's cake proved popular with both children and adults. Soon the bedlam of children who have eaten too much sugar reigned, so nobody noticed that Eddie and Alex were having a disagreement over possession of one of the toy trucks. Alex, who was large for his age, was keeping a particularly desirable blue garbage truck out of Eddie's

Eddie Takes Off, Cont.

reach. Eddie's cries of "Mine, mine!" went unnoticed by his mother, who was standing with her back to the yard near the house with Mrs. Johnson, listening sympathetically to the trials of the life of a community council-member's wife. Alex, growing impatient with Eddie's disputation of the truck's ownership, began hitting Eddie with a chubby, half-closed fist, holding the blue garbage truck just out of Eddie's reach with the other arm. Although this, too, escaped the attention of Eddie's mother, she was instantly aware seconds later that all of the children and adults in the backyard had simultaneously fallen completely silent. Even before she turned around, Mrs. Johnson's gaping stare told her what she would see. There in the middle of the yard Eddie floated several feet above Alex, out of the reach of the chubby fist. Alex stared up in such shock that he dropped the blue garbage truck, everybody else in the yard was speechless. Eddie caught his mother's eye, and one look at the expression on her face told him all he needed to know; he immediately dropped out of the air into a heap on the ground.

"Just what are you trying to prove?" sputtered Mrs. Johnson. "I don't know what kind of stupid trick this is, but you just scared the *bejeezus* out of all the children. Someone could have gotten hurt. Out, now! I want you out of my yard, and *don't ever come back!*"

Eddie's mother grabbed him by the hand and began dragging him away. Eddie's desperate attempts at explanation displaced his tears. "Mommy, he was hitting me.... He's bigger than I am...." But his pleading was swallowed by his mother's mortified silence. As they reached the sidewalk they could hear the agitated mutterings of the group on the lawn behind them: children beginning to cry, parents trying to reassure them that it was just a trick, that it wasn't real. Alex's voice reached them just as they turned on to the sidewalk to go back to their own house: *"Weirdo!"*

That evening Eddie lay in bed, miserable. He tried snuggling into his sheets; he tried levitating a few inches above the mattress, which until today had always comforted him when he was trying to get to sleep. He felt embarrassed, ashamed that he had hurt his mother. He felt exposed in a way that was new to him. And so Eddie made a promise to himself with the intensity of a child's confused pain: he would never again allow anyone to see him fly.

For the first week or so after the party Eddie stuck to his promise. He continued to amuse himself with an occasional loop just under the dining room ceiling, but never when his parents or anyone else was present. After a couple of weeks his promise faded from a daily mantra to a vaguer intention, but the habit stuck of never letting anyone see him fly. His parents noticed, of course. "I hope nothing's wrong," said his mother. "I just want him to be normal and happy like other children." "It was just a phase," said his father. "I figured he'd grow out of it." And Eddie did seem happy, which took some of the sting out of the fact that Eddie's mother never was invited back to Mrs. Johnson's house.

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Eddie Takes Off, Cont.

Eddie slowly shuffled out of the school building carrying his book bag. Only three days into ninth grade and already it was a drag — boring classes, no new friends, too much homework. He walked down the sidewalk, lost in depressing thoughts about school, until he became aware, seconds too late, of the footsteps of three boys running up behind him. He felt the first blow on his back, causing him to stumble and drop his bag, which was promptly kicked into the bushes by another of the three. Books and papers flew everywhere. As he turned to face his attackers a fist slammed into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to collapse on the ground. He heard laughter and a familiar voice shout *"Weirdo!"* above him. The three boys ran off, one of them saying, "Good one, Johnson!"

Eddie sat there for a minute trying to regain his breath. Then he crawled over to the bushes on his hands and knees and half-heartedly began collecting the spilled contents of his book bag. As he reached for the math worksheet due tomorrow a small, delicate hand wearing nail gloss and a pinkie ring grabbed it. He looked up at the owner of the hand. She was blond, with more freckles than he'd ever seen in his life.

"Hi, I'm Jane. I'm in your Science class. Here, lemme help you." She picked up the remaining books and put them into Eddie's bag while he held it open. "What's your name?"

"Um, Eddie."

"Nice to meet you, Eddie." She smelled great. "That Alex Johnson is the biggest jerk. I don't know why he's so mean. Well, that's all your stuff. I gotta run. See you tomorrow in class." As Eddie watched her walk away he didn't notice his aching stomach. And he didn't notice that he was grinning like an idiot.

Eddie suddenly developed an intense interest in Science class. He took advantage of every opportunity to say a few words to Jane: "Here, you dropped your pen." "Think it'll rain during gym class this afternoon?" Once Eddie and Jane were lab partners. They finished the assignment successfully, although Eddie burned his thumb on a Bunsen burner. He barely even noticed, he was so nervous. Jane was always polite, but she never really got involved in conversation with him. In fact, she didn't treat Eddie any differently from any of the other boys in the class. Jane, on the other hand, was all that Eddie could think about. Eddie would lie awake in his bed at night thinking about her. He would slowly levitate off the mattress, raising his brown comforter from underneath, looking like a loaf of bread rising in the oven.

Eddie didn't know what to do. One evening he approached his mother, who was sitting in front of the TV knitting something large and blue with great determination.

"Mom," he started, "there's this girl in my Science class...."

"What's her name?" His mother kept knitting.

"Her name's Jane, and she's... well, I mean, I kind of —"

"What is it, dear?" Knit, knit, knit.

"Never mind, Mom."

The next evening Eddie made up his mind to call Jane and ask her out on a date. He waited until after dinner, then left his parents in front of the TV to use the upstairs phone. He paced for

Eddie Takes Off, Cont.

about twenty minutes, his palms getting sweaty. He picked up the phone, held it for a while, then put it back down and paced some more. Finally, barely realizing what he was doing, he picked up the phone again and dialed Jane's number. She answered on the second ring. "Hello?" Eddie couldn't make a sound come out of his mouth. "Hello? Is there anybody there?" Jane hung up, leaving Eddie listening to the dial tone for a minute. Then he set down the phone and went to bed.

For the rest of the school year Eddie was inconsolable. He no longer even had the courage to try to make small talk with Jane. When she would make some casual comment to him in class he would stammer and flee as quickly as he could. It felt like the only social contact he had for all those months was the continual baiting and occasional beating from Alex Johnson. Eventually it was spring, and then the last day of school. This was it, Eddie knew; if he didn't ask Jane out today he would never make it through the summer. After the last class he waited in the hall near Jane's locker. When he saw her walking to her locker he stepped toward her, forcing himself not to think about anything except for what he needed to say.

"Hi, Eddie, it's good to see you. How're you doing?" Jane smiled. It seemed like she was genuinely glad to see him. Maybe, just maybe, she would agree to a date. Eddie felt a surge of optimism. In fact he felt almost giddy, so giddy that he was on the verge of lifting into the air without even realizing it. His heels were off the floor, leaving him standing on tiptoe. If only Jane knew how special he was! He could show her, she would understand! He felt so happy that he hadn't realized that someone was standing behind him. *Bam!* He went flying into the lockers face first, then crumpled to the floor.

"Weirdo!"

"Alex! Pick on somebody your own size!" Jane was watching Alex Johnson and his friends run away down the hall. She turned back to Eddie, who was wiping at the blood that was starting to run from his nose. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Have a good summer, Jane." Eddie walked down the hall and out of the school building as fast as he could.

It was a long, miserable summer for Eddie.

* * * * *

The senior prom wasn't turning out at all like Eddie had expected. He had never really gotten over Jane. He had managed a couple of dates with other girls during high school, but they never really amounted to anything — compared to Jane, any other girl fell short. The biggest impact she had wound up having on his life was that since that humiliating last day of ninth grade he had never flown again, not even in private. He wasn't sure if he was even still able to fly, and he wasn't sure if he cared. Over the years he had thought many times about taking Jane to the senior prom, but wasn't really surprised to find himself here tonight, not with the girl of his dreams, but with a couple of his buddies, Max and Jerry. "Stag night!" they'd said to each other, and laughed. *Loser night,* they'd thought to themselves, and sighed. Still, the night hadn't been that bad, and

Eddie Takes Off, Cont.

Eddie had arranged for them to wind up at an after-dance party that he knew Jane would be coming to. At least he would get a chance to see Jane tonight, even though he knew that he wouldn't be able to talk to her without going to pieces.

Jerry came back from the kitchen carrying three cans of pop to the corner where Eddie and Max were standing. None of them really knew what to do at a party, so they stood there sipping and trying to look nonchalant, when the front door opened and Max said "Here come some happy couples." Eddie saw Jane walk into the room. She was wearing a long blue dress which bared her freckle-covered arms. She had her hair swept up on top of her head. For a moment the image of the gangly ninth grader that Eddie had first fallen for flashed in front of his eyes, only to be replaced by the sight of the beautiful young woman she had become. Eddie twitched with a spasm of heartache.

Then he noticed who Jane had walked in with and spilled his pop on his rented tuxedo. Jane's prom date was *Alex Johnson*. Eddie felt faint. The blood drained out of his face. Max noticed and asked if Eddie was okay. It sounded like Max's voice was coming from the bottom of a swimming pool. *Alex Johnson!* Every injustice, every disappointment, everything that had ever gone wrong in Eddie's entire life seemed like nothing compared to this. Fortunately more and more people were showing up at the party, so he could hide in the corner and silently listen to Max and Jerry make stupid jokes about arriving couples and what they were wearing. He had no idea how much time had passed when he realized that Max and Jerry's infantile commentary had taken a new turn. Max had overheard that "...some of them are going out to the lake past the Valley Acres development to build a bonfire and stay up all night."

Eddie heard himself say "Who's going?"

"A bunch of them. Greg and Allison, Jeremy and Lisa, Alex and Jane —"

Jerry chimed in: "Yeah, they're gonna have a real party out there tonight!"

Eddie chugged the rest of his pop in one huge gulp. He looked for Jane in the crowd, hoping for one last glimpse of her before his life was ruined forever. There they were, Jane and Alex, standing a bit apart from the rest of their friends. It looked like they were having a disagreement. Jane kept shaking her head, and Alex was raising his voice. As Eddie watched, Alex grabbed Jane's wrist, not very gently, and began dragging her in the direction of the front door. As Alex jerked her into motion, Jane's hair came undone and fell over her shoulders. Without thinking, Eddie threw down his empty pop can and rushed towards them. He stretched out his arms in front of him and unconsciously propelled his body by flying, rushing over the carpet so low that nobody realized that he wasn't just running. He slammed into Alex, who let Jane's wrist go and slammed into the wall so hard that his head made a small indentation in the plaster.

Everyone in the room stared, frozen and speechless. Alex stood and turned to face Eddie, his hands balling into fists. But he stayed where he was. Something in him whispered that Eddie had hit him with more force than should have been possible to build up by simply running across the room. And something about the surrounding crowd, staring and silent, triggered a memory of a five-year-old boy who had just dropped a blue garbage truck and was confronted by the impossible

Eddie Takes Off, Cont.

spectacle of another five-year-old boy floating in mid-air above him. For a moment a battle raged in Alex's mind: the cocky teenager, livid with rage, struggled with the little boy whose bullying had provoked an impossible, terrifying situation. The little boy won. Alex ran for the front door and bolted outside. Moments later everyone in the house heard the roar of his Camaro as he sped away. Eddie became aware of Jane's hand on his shoulder. "Oh, God," she said. "Let's get out of this place." The two of them walked out the front door together. Nobody in the room had said a word.

Outside it was cool. The moon was full and cast their shadows in front of them as they walked. Jane stopped and turned to face Eddie. "Thanks. I feel so stupid. I don't even know what I was doing there with him. I should have known it would turn out bad." She put her arms around Eddie and hugged him. He put his arms around her and hugged back. He started to say something, then stopped. He started to move his face closer to hers, then stopped. She looked up at the moon and said, "It's such a beautiful night. I wish that we could just get out of here."

Eddie tightened his grip around her waist. "Maybe we can." His feet lifted from the sidewalk. He felt the surprise in Jane's arms as they tightened around him. And then, without word, the two of them began rising into the calm night air.

Let's work together to make your teaching the best it can be.

Please contact me any time!

Even the best workshops and teaching materials can't meet the needs of every teacher all the time. That's why we need to stay in touch. Send me an e-mail any time you have a question. I'll do my best to get back to you quickly with answers, additional teaching materials, or other resources.

Please send suggestions, questions, and corrections to:
stevepeha@ttms.org

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Learning Patterns

Teach Smarter Not Harder

Imagine a structure 13 years tall, 180 days wide, and five subjects deep. This is a K-12 education. Each cell in this structure represents a single class period in a single subject for a total of 11,700 educational opportunities.

By using *Teaching That Makes Sense® Learning Patterns™* we can reduce this academic load for students, simplify planning and instruction for teachers, and help more kids learn more things in less time and with less teacher effort.

Learning Patterns are cross-curricular tools optimized for successful teaching in any subject or grade. They are designed to be used, re-used, and shared across classrooms without requiring extensive training or preparation.

By analyzing standards documents and the methods of effective teachers, *Teaching That Makes Sense* has identified underlying commonalities in learning targets across the curriculum. These commonalities represent dozens of potential assignments that can be taught and learned through a small set of foundational skills.

Consider exposition. Students consume and create expository information in many ways: they read expository texts, write expository essays, create reports, answer test questions, etc. As varied as expository expression is, it has a simple underlying structure that can be explained by a single *Learning Pattern*.

Some *Learning Patterns* cover skills like narration, exposition, and persuasion. Others help teachers and students with things like assessment, reading comprehension, and memorization. The same patterns can be used across grade levels and subject areas as well, so kids take their learning with them as they grow.

For more information about Learning Patterns click here.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Agile Transformation

Building Collective Capacity for School-Wide Change

We are discovering better ways of improving schools by doing it and by helping others do it. Through this work, we have come to value:

- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

Agile Transformation is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **"Stand Up" Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **"Just in Time" Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements of Agile Schools

The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements

continued...

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.

8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.

9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.

10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.

12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

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