

the
**WRITER'S
TUNE-UP MANUAL**

by Craig A. Hart



35 Exercises That Will Scrape
the Rust Off Your Writing!

"This book is good. I hate it. Craig Hart grabs writers by the shoulders and helps us dirty our hands with sweat and wrenches under the hood of our writing. Don't read this book unless you want to get a lot better at your craft."

- Jacob Nordby, Author of *The Divine Arsonist*

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To A.M.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Writer's Tune-Up Manual*. If you're like most writers, the one thing you want most of all is to improve your craft. Everybody, from already established writers to the greenest newbie out there, can stand a little tweaking of the brake lines, an oil change, or new air filter. The goal of this little book is to scrape the rust off various aspects of writing by providing targeted exercises. This book is designed to help you hone your craft by doing the very thing you want to improve: writing!

We've arranged the book into five sections: Character, Plot, Point of View, Dialogue, and Description and Setting. We have also provided space for you to write in the book, but you will likely find it helpful to use a piece of scrap paper or a laptop while you arrange your thoughts and actually do the included exercises.

Are you ready to scrape the rust off your writing? Good! Let's get started.

How To Use This Book

We've arranged this book in the form of an "importance sandwich." Before you get hungry, let me explain.

The first section, which includes ten amazing exercises, is designed to tackle character creation and development, the most important aspect of writing. Characters are the lifeblood of any good book.

Following that are three smaller sections that cover point of view, dialogue, and description and setting. While these are all important, they play second piccolo to character.

The fifth and final section is the second big one, plot. There are ten exercises for plot development. By mastering character

and plot, you give your book a fighting chance and without character and plot, no book can survive.

Feel free to skip around and tackle whatever area you wish to shine up first, but I do recommend visiting the two larger sections at some point.

Now let's get writing!

- Craig A. Hart

Editor-in-Chief, *The Rusty Nail*

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CHARACTER

**“I have no taste for either
poverty or honest labor,
so writing is the only
recourse left for me.”
- Hunter S. Thompson**

GULLIBLE CHARACTER

Write up to 500 words beginning and ending with this character statement sentence: “She believed everything she was ever told.”

Try to create a character arc throughout the piece so that the ending sentence, although identical, means something entirely different from the opening line. How does this character change? How do things look differently to her after more life experience? Try to get inside her head and see things from her perspective.

I’m not gonna lie, this is a tough one, but should illustrate the importance of the character development arc.

NOTES

**“A writer is someone for whom
writing is more difficult
than it is for other people.”
- Thomas Mann**

“NO, NOT THEM AGAIN!”

So we all know the cliché characters: the Irish cop, the prostitute with a heart of gold, the writer with a drinking problem, and so forth. Clichés often exist for a reason, of course, and sometimes it’s okay to use a tried and true character. But not always. Populate your stories with only stock characters and there won’t be any reason to read your tales over anyone else’s.

For this writing exercise, create and describe three different characters, each of whom possesses at least one stereotyped character trait. For the rest of the description, however, abandon the norm and make each character as different from what the reader might expect as possible. It doesn’t necessarily need to hold together; this is just practice. The point is to begin breaking down the tendency most of us have to devise old, worn-out characters.

EXAMPLE

*Sean, a beefy, red-faced Irishman, is a twenty-year police veteran who always complains about his aching feet. **He loves attending Broadway musicals and has a secret Hello Kitty collection in his basement.***

Spend at least 100 words describing each of your three characters. Who knows, you might even end up using them!

NOTES

**“There is nothing to writing.
All you do is sit down
at a typewriter and bleed.”
- Ernest Hemingway**

DYNAMIC CHARACTER

Write 500 words beginning with this sentence: “He hadn’t always been this way, but he recognized and appreciated the change.” Be creative and try to think outside the box. What is this change? Does “he” appreciate it for the right or wrong reasons?

NOTES

**“There are three rules for
writing a novel.
Unfortunately, no one knows
what they are.”
- W. Somerset Maugham**

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

This is a three-part exercise, totaling 300 words. Use the first 100 words to describe a character's physical appearance. Use the second 100 words to describe a character's personality traits. Now use the final 100 words to describe how others see this character. You may find it helpful to shift POV (point of view) between the first two sections and the third. It's okay. You can do it this time.

NOTES

**“When I write,
I feel like an armless,
legless man
with a crayon in his mouth.”
- Kurt Vonnegut**

OUT OF CHARACTER

In real life people do occasionally act out of character or do things we wouldn't normally expect them to do. In fiction, there should be a good reason for a character to do something outside of the ordinary. If there is a story featuring a cowardly character, they can't do something incredibly brave at the end unless there has been a progressive character arc throughout the text. There needs to be a motivation for the change.

Write a short scene featuring a character with a well-defined personality (cowardice, anger, greed, kindness, etc.) Include examples that demonstrate the personality. At the end of the scene, have your character behave in a way completely opposed to how they would be expected to act. Notice how this seems jarring and false.

Now think about what elements you could incorporate to show why the character might act in a manner opposed to his personality. Did something change in their life? Did someone with great influence lead them to alter their thinking?

Write a short addition to the scene to suggest why the character behaved as they did.

NOTES

**“Write what disturbs you,
what you fear,
what you have not been
willing to speak about.
Be willing to be split open.”
- Natalie Goldberg**

THE FEAR FACTOR

Often a book will focus on a character's struggle with themselves. This falls into the category of a Man v. Self plot theme, but can also refer to the development of character. A story that traces a character's progress from one place to another (usually non-physical) can be just as much a piece of character arc than anything else, although it is often used as the main plot, particularly in more literary novels. In Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, the title character wears a mask to hide his disfiguration, a metaphor for deeper psychological wounds, and struggles to extend and receive the emotion he's never felt: compassion. The Phantom is afraid of showing himself vulnerable, as this has resulted in past pain and suffering.

Use an existing character (or create a new one and take the time to develop it) and put them in a situation in which they must face their worst fear. How do they naturally react? Likely, they recoil from whatever the situation is. Now create a list of events that may result in the character reacting differently. Rewrite the scene with these events in mind. Do they provide enough motivation for change? How did they change the character's perception?

NOTES

**“Your intuition knows
what to write,
so get out of the way.”
- Ray Bradbury**

THE FOIL

In literature, a foil is most often used to illustrate or heighten awareness of a certain aspect of the main character. Sometimes it is difficult to notice or pinpoint a specific trait or quality until it is set against an opposing backdrop. Light only exists because of darkness and vice-versa. Without one, we would have no concept of the other. This technique is particularly useful in character development, although it has appeared in various manifestations and employed to varying degrees of effectiveness.

For this exercise, create a character that is the opposite of your main character or, at least, less than or different from your main character in the way(s) most vital to the story. If a main selling point of your main character is physical strength, you likely won't want a sidekick who is just as strong or stronger. Or perhaps this new character possesses bad traits that are opposed to those lofty ones which your main character champions the most. As examples, think of Dr. Watson/Sherlock Holmes and Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter.

Once you've devised the characters, write two short scenes. In the first have your main character give a monologue about their most important qualities or goals. Boring, isn't it? Now write another scene in which the main character and the foil argue about the earlier monologue. Notice how this gently forces the reader to become active in the story and choose sides, thereby becoming more invested in your story.

NOTES

**“Writing is not necessarily
something to be ashamed of,
but do it in private and
wash your hands afterwards.”**

- Robert A. Heinlein

MR. OR MS. PERFECT

Perfection should generally be avoided in a character. Real people, such as your readers, aren't flawless and chances are they are not going to be able to fully identify with a character who is. They might even get annoyed and put your work down altogether. Reading about a character with no faults or vices is like reading a sermon...there's a reason why sermon anthologies don't typically appear on *The New York Times* Bestsellers List.

Within 300 words, create a new character by detailing their failings. You'll likely be tempted to temper the description with redeeming qualities, but resist the urge. Give at least five faults. They can be socially perceived vices, like smoking or gambling, or perhaps personality traits, like a raging temper or deep selfishness.

Once you're done listing the faults, read over them and see how you feel about this character. Do you hate them? Feel sorry for them?

Now write a similar, but separate, character sketch, only this time list exclusively good qualities. Examine your feelings about this character. Do you envy their piety? Or perhaps want them to fall down a deep well? Does it feel like they are wagging their finger at you?

Put the two exercises together, combining character traits (you don't have to use all of them) and come up with one master sketch. Notice how much deeper the character feels once there are both good and bad aspects to their personality. This is the bedrock for creating interesting, fully-rounded characters.

**“A non-writing writer is
a monster courting insanity.”
- Franz Kafka**

“WE’LL CALL YOU”

An important aspect to creating believable characters and then using them to populate your story is to know your characters. Admittedly, part of a story arc, especially one that is character-driven, is the change that happens to a character’s belief system, motivation, worldview, or goals, but it can be helpful to know something about your characters before even beginning the story.

In this exercise, select two of the main characters from your planned project and have them interview each other for a job. It can be any job, but one that requires a lot of information might be more useful (and more fun). Perhaps they are applying for a position in national security, such as the CIA, FBI, or some other equally paranoid organization. To up the pressure, maybe even have them being grilled by their mafia mentor, where one wrong answer will mean a broken kneecap or worse.

Choose one character to be the interviewer, the other to be the interviewee. Then switch places. Try to ask at least twenty questions per interview, because that has a nice ring to it. Where have I heard that before?

NOTES

**“That’s what fiction is for.
It’s for getting at the truth
when the truth isn’t
sufficient for the truth.”**

- Tim O’Brien