

INTRODUCTION

This book is the answer to a question I first asked myself years ago when I was in a bookstore checking out the newest “how to write” books. I was a published author at that point, but I’ve always maintained that a writer can never know enough. So there I was, searching for a new pearl of wisdom to strengthen my craft.

I went away disappointed, and later it occurred to me why. “How to write” books always approach the subject the same way — from the point of view of a successful writer sharing hard-earned wisdom. Well, that’s logical, right? Yet these successful writers urge their students to do things like “let your imagination run wild” or “think about how you would feel if” or “visualize the scene.”

My question: how does a person actually *do* stuff like that? In other words, if I’m a writer who needs to hone such intangible conceptual skills, how can those skills possibly be taught to me? What does it really mean to “let my imagination run wild”? How can I *learn* to do that?

I’ve never found a writing book that effectively answers those questions.

Now that I’m a successful writer with fifteen years of full-time freelance credits behind me, I realize that the answers don’t lie in the art of writing. They lie in the art of *acting*. You see, before I was a writer, I was an actor, and only recently did it occur to me that *acting* exercises taught me how to visualize, how to let my imagination run free, how to feel what another person might feel, and many other such intangible conceptual skills. More importantly, acting exercises taught me how to express the results in a controlled, reliable and entertaining fashion. Unlike writing exercises, acting exercises force you to access your gut, that base level of personality and instinct that holds the ultimate spark of creative power. Acting exercises teach conceptual skills from the bottom up. They teach you how to *do* it.

This approach works so well that I’ve decided to write the book that I always looked for but never found. *Writing Is Acting* offers a unique point of view to a well-worn subject, as well as a completely fresh set of tools that writers can use to improve their craft — and themselves.

When I began to develop the *Writing Is Acting* concept, I had to ask myself some questions — questions that you’re probably going to ask as well.

Why compare writing to acting? They’re two different things!

As writers of fiction, our job is to tell stories about fictitious characters and fictitious events. In order to make a reader believe in our characters and relate to them and their circumstances, we must become the characters on the page — that is, we must see through their eyes, hear through their ears, touch with their fingertips, feel with their hearts. Then we must convey all that juicy subjective data in such a way that the reader will feel the same things that our characters are feeling, thus making the reader care about the characters and become concerned about their circumstances. Guess what?

That’s acting.

But I’m Not an Actor...Am I?

Yes, in fact you are. Everybody is. We humans are goal oriented creatures. We want food, we want shelter, we want love. In order to achieve these and many other goals, we

“act” in ways that will bring us the best results. Acting to achieve goals is a natural strategy for success.

So If All People Are Actors, Are All People Writers, Too?

Bingo!

The process of acting towards a goal — a salesman trying to make a sale, kids acting cool within their peer group, two friends meeting to mend a rift in their relationship — often involve prepared speeches. We think about what we’re going to say ahead of time. Sometimes we even write speeches down or practice them out loud before a mirror, as in the case of job interviews, first dates or that moment when you ask your boss for a raise. We compose text in our heads, revise it and edit it, shaping it just right so that it communicates exactly what we want to say at just the right moment.

That’s writing.

How can acting techniques help writers?

Acting techniques can help us discover facets of our personalities of which we might not be aware. Acting techniques can help our day-to-day interactions, thus making our efforts more successful. Many people take basic acting classes with no desire to enter the profession — they just want to use the techniques to enrich their lives and relationships.

Those same techniques can help the writer’s ability to “act on paper,” making our creative efforts all that much more believable and effective. Some acting techniques can help us to understand our characters better. After all, just as we real people “act” to obtain goals, so too should fictional characters “act” to obtain their goals. Some acting techniques can improve our prose, dialogue and ability to plot stories. Some techniques can help us brainstorm ideas. There are even aspects of acting that can help us during the revision and polishing stages of a manuscript. By thinking about story and character as an actor would, we suddenly have a whole new bag of tricks that can help us approach our stories and characters from a fresh perspective.

Well, I think that’s a pretty good lead-in to this whole *Writing Is Acting* gig. It’s time to get this show on the road. Okay, places, everybody! Cue the next page and — *action!*

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CHAPTER 1 **What Is an Actor? What Is a Writer?**

An actor is a physical instrument that plays itself before a live audience. An actor is a conduit between a world that is real and a world that is not real. An actor is a medium, calling into reality the spirit and personality of someone non-real so that spectators can see, hear, smell, touch, sometimes taste — even interact — with that non-real being. An actor is a walking, talking puzzle whose carefully-shaped pieces fit together to bring imagination to life, to make fantasy reality, and to entertain and enlighten.

A writer is exactly the same thing. A writer's performance is not live and onstage, however, but live and onpage, a print performance forever ready for that moment when the paper curtain rises.

Welcome to the Psych Ward

The greatest challenge facing both actor and writer is to be both the player and the instrument being played. In other words, actors and writers are professional split personalities.

The basic function of the actor is to perform two jobs simultaneously: objectively bring an imaginary character to life, and subjectively maintain a sense of self as the artist who controls the physical performance. The actor's mind has to share two points of view at the same time and keep them focused, interactive and yet carefully separate and balanced. The actor inwardly draws on all the learned techniques of performance while outwardly displaying only those tangible qualities that support the character.

The job of the writer is that and more. We writers not only have to maintain our sense of artistic self, but we have to do so while *literally* performing every single character in our story. Plus we have to perform all the tasks of the director, producer, casting director, set designer, lighting designer, stage manager, prop master, make-up designer, costumer — and in the case of film and television, we're camera operators, grips, gaffers, script supervisors, Foley artists, location scouts, musical directors, stuntmen, coffee gophers — yeegads, we writers have to do it all!

Yet even with this insane burden, writers have one great advantage over actors — we are spared the pressures of delivering our final product before a live audience. True, we eventually face that Moment of Truth when our carefully crafted words meet the eyes of a reader, but we're usually not present at the time.

If we're lucky.

Artistic Intent

J.D. Salinger once said, "You were a reader before you were a writer." I think it's safe to say that all writers and actors these days were audience members (probably TV watchers) before becoming writers and actors.

Artists of all kinds first *appreciate* art before they attempt to create it themselves. Appreciation usually motivates those first attempts. So both writers and actors know what their audiences expect: entertainment, enlightenment, an experience that will in some way move them or change them, or at the very least, divert them for a few hours.

Both the writer and actor practice their craft with artistic intent — that is, we create because we have some final goal in mind. For the writer, the goal is to tell a story. For the actor, the goal is to bring a character to life in order that a story may be told. Either way, we both have the audience in mind. They are the ones who will receive our efforts. It is for the audience that we practice our crafts in the first place.

There is one important difference to bear in mind here, however. The actor is, in the simplest of terms, an interpreter. Artistic intent for the actor must mesh with that of the playwright. As well, the actor's artistic intent has to mesh with those of his fellow actors (unless he's undertaking a one-man *Hamlet* or something). Even then, the actor still depends on some kind of lighting crew, stage manager, costumers, etc. The key to acting, then, is *interacting*.

Writers, on the other hand, write alone. And we control everything. Our artistic intent is whatever we want it to be. Ah, but as Uncle Ben said to young Spiderman, "With

great power comes great responsibility.” And a lot of hard brain work. If the key to acting is interacting, the key to writing is *intra-acting*.

We writers do not stand among our characters, we *are* the characters, all of them all at once. We exist inside of them, motivating them across their story stage, as well as outside of them, moving them across the printed page. We writers have to make a constant stream of creative decisions that can tax our imaginations to their limits.

Tools, Techniques and Tricks

Fortunately a wide variety of methods have been developed to aid the creative process. Both the writing and acting art forms have a long history, and in many ways, a shared history. Each form has undergone countless metamorphoses as its practitioners constantly respond to changing society and look for new ways to improve their art.

In this book I am using the terms *Tools*, *Techniques* and *Tricks* to describe those methods. A *Tool* is an acting point of view, attitude, skill or exercise that can help a writer develop himself in order to better understand himself and thus better understand human nature. Tools help a writer become an artist.

A *Technique* is an acting point of view, attitude, skill or exercise that can help a writer develop plot and characters, block scenes, and compose text and dialogue.

Tricks are the instruments of revision and fine-tuning — acting points of view, attitudes, skills and exercises that focus on critical analysis of the completed work. Tricks help a writer to analyze her work, identify problems and, hopefully, fix them.

Writing + Acting = Playtime

Armed with our new Tools, Techniques and Tricks, the job of writing will become a little easier. But writing should be a joy as well as a job. Like the professional actor, the professional writer (or the writer-in-training and even the dilettante) needs to see the craft as a form of play. Cavorting around in Wonderland is one of the reasons why we artists enter the creative arts in the first place, isn't it?

So if there's one prerequisite for this book, it's this: *ya gotta be willing to play*. Actors play all the time. General acting classes hone general skills that focus on both the body and the mind, ridding the actor of inhibitions and freeing his creative spirit. The rehearsal process involves improvisations and other games that lead to personal insights, character insights, and a clearer understanding of how to communicate the plot in question. The purpose of this book is to borrow a variety of those acting philosophies and exercises and present them for the benefit of writers.

Some of the exercises offered are strictly mental: things to think about, objects to study, techniques of inner and outer observation — in other words, things to do while sitting down quietly alone, with a partner or in groups. Other exercises will involve physical play, activities to be done in the privacy of the home as well as some that are best done in public alone, with a partner or in groups. The degree of physicality required varies.

You'll find four kinds of exercises within these pages:

- traditional beginner exercises I've borrowed from acting without major modifications;
- traditional exercises I've borrowed and modified to better meet the needs of writers;
- exercises I've made up that parallel the spirit of the acting profession yet appeal to the more solitary, shy writer-types out there;
- exercises that I've made up for my own use and now share with you.

There are exercises in this book to suit everybody, as long as you're willing to play. I mean, think about it — why are children so creative? Because they *play*.
C'mon! Let's go make mud pies!