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**Learning to Question your Elephant Child: Who, What, Where, When and Why**

**By Stephen Earley Jordan, II**

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Having problems writing? I don't know why. San Francisco Chronicle columnist Jon Carroll writes up to five columns a week. After all, if he can write five columns, you should be able to write a five-lined poem—but that does not seem to be the case.

How does he do it? Carroll claimed to recite lines from Rudyard Kipling's "The Elephant Child":

"I have six humble serving men

They taught me all I knew

Their names are what

And where and when

And why and how and who."

I'm more than sure that two incentives for Jon Carroll are 1.) Creating deadlines and 2.) His salary!  
Yes, we writers DO get paid every now and then!

Basing my philosophies on those few lines of Kipling's "The Elephant Child", my advice is to "Simply Ask Questions". Rummage through some old work (whether it be poetry, nonfiction, or fiction) that you've written and use the following techniques to enhance your skills. And, then, ask yourself the follow questions.

WHAT is the underlying theme?

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Try to come up with a single-word or phrase to describe your story. Perhaps one reason your story has not been effective in the past is that you have too many intertwining stories. This, in turn, can cause confusion for the reader. So, ask yourself, "What is my story about?" And, give yourself answers such as: Desolation, Lost Hope, Self-Confidence, Racism, Attained Dreams, etc. If you can KISS (keep it simple stupid), then your readers won't MISS your point.

As practice, read some of the great contemporary writers and ask yourself the same question—"What is the underlying theme?" Describe the book in one word or one phrase, instead of using a high school book-report technique.

WHERE does your story or poem take place? Knowing the setting can allow you to be a bit more descriptive with your work. Does your poem or prose take place in Alaska? Florida? China? Yugoslavia? Hawaii? Kentucky? Each of these places is, perhaps, equal opposites of the next. To know your setting you have two choices— 1.) Be a good researcher; collect pictures and read as much as you can about the location, or 2.) Take a road trip! Nothing can be grander than to spend your

weekend visiting unknown territories.

WHEN did the events take place in which you are writing? If you're doing factual reporting—this is especially a MUST-DO. For instance, if you read a news article a reader wants to know when Ms. Johnson's house was burglarized. Did it happen June 20, 2001? June 20, 1984? Did the events take place when it was winter with ten inches of snow? Or, better still, did the events take place at Virginia Beach mid-August?

WHY did the events take place? Is there a conflict within your character? A lot of times character's (and real people too) have problems only because their conscious is "eating them away". Is this the case? If so, why does your character feel so guilty that he made such decisions? Perhaps the events that take place are only cause-effect. Most always people cause their own mental downfall and breakdown. Always know why your characters complete every task and why the events take place.

How did the events happen? Too often people will say, "I had a car wreck today..." But, do they leave it at that? No, no, no. You must always tell how the events happened. Were you driving in the incorrect lane, but still feel it's not your fault? Did you skid uncontrollably on a patch of ice? Maybe, you wanted to avoid the slow-moving tortoise that crossed your lane? If other characters are involved, it's important to get their perspective in dialogue. Maybe they feel the events happened differently.

Who did the events happen to? Who your events happen to is one of the main focuses. You have to choose your characters carefully. Why? Well, it would change a story completely if you wrote of a 68-year old cheerleader. Your work would be a different story if the character were an autistic adult. How would the events change if, let's say, the main character was indeed the Elephant Child, child of the deceased Elephant Man? Be creative with your characters and allow their personalities to work well for you when creating your piece.

Sometimes writers can use techniques that allow them to disregard some of these steps. Oh, Really? —You question. Yes. For instance, a writer may know the intentions of a character, a location—but you

may not want to put it in print. My suggestion is that you KNOW all the answers to the above questions to make the work have more substance. By knowing all the answers you can create images, people, and scenarios by using symbols and customs of a particular area.

Stephen Jordan has five years experience within the educational publishing industry. Stephen was a freelance editor with such educational foundations as Princeton Review, The College Board, New York University, and Columbia University. Away from the office, Stephen promotes his creative writing with his home-freelance business OutStretch Publications and his artwork. Stephen holds two Bachelor of Arts degrees in writing and literature from Alderson-Broaddus College of Philippi, West Virginia.

## **The Fable of the Elephant and the Woman Who Wasn't Blind**

**By Susan Dunn**

This isn't the story about the four blind men and the elephant, this is the story of me looking at that 6 ton elephant in the zoo, tethered to that tiny stake, and wondering why on earth she doesn't break loose. Instead she rocks back and forth when it should take an electric fence, iron bars, or 25 armed men to confine her, if that.

It's all in her mind, God love her.

How can this happen? How has she forgotten what she's capable of?

Elephants are mammals, like us humans, and they share the limbic brain with us. This means, unlike reptiles, we are able to learn. Elephants need to learn many things to survive; for instance they aren't born knowing what their trunk is for. Some aren't weaned until their 10th year, and they're all completely dependant on their mothers (physically and emotionally) for 4-5 years.

Most of the growth of the elephant brain takes place after birth, and this happens with learning.

Unfortunately it, like us, learns both good and bad things. The elephant may learn when it tries to leave the herd, the others will come after it causing a fuss, which scares it, so it remembers not to wander off.

It may learn it can pick up tasty treats with its trunk, and so it remembers to do this.

Or someone may capture it when it's little, and put a chain around its leg attached to a stake that's too strong for it to pull away from. It will try with all its might, and only succeed in tearing its leg which causes more pain, so eventually, being smart, being able to learn, it gives up.

What it has learned is hopelessness and helplessness. This means for the rest of its life, even when it weigh 6 tons and should be nearly impossible to contain, it will allow that chain on its leg to rule its life.

So there stands that 6-ton animal, tethered by nothing really, except its fearful memories.

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Has this happened to you? (Think about it.)

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