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Writing a Page Turner

By Jennifer Minar

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What's going to happen next? You turn the pages as quickly as you can. Agitated, you read on, lured by the sense of dread that's pulsing through your veins.

You don't realize it, but you're holding your breath. Something's going to happen. Something big! You just saw Jane Protagonist's fiancé slip something into her drink. But he's deeply in love with her...or so you thought!

What did he slip into the drink? And why? What's he up to?

Scene after scene, he keeps dropping something into her drink, and you're becoming more and more confused. He's also meeting with a female colleague of hers in secret. Who is she? Why are they meeting like this? What's going on? Now he's luring her younger brother to a upscale hotel, claiming he has urgent news. But he's never met her brother. What could he possibly have to tell him? What?! What?! What?!

Has a book ever filled you with such anticipation? Have you ever stayed up hours past your bedtime to finish a book? Have you ever turned the pages so quickly you ended up with a nasty paper cut? Or, called your mother in the wee hours of the morning to tell her that she must read that book?

Why did that book make such a big impact on you? Quite possibly, it had to do with two things: engaging characters and a carefully constructed plot. Both are crucial to the makings of a great novel.

CREATING CHARACTERS

Your characters must be intriguing and memorable. But, most important, they must be worth caring about. After all, if I don't care what happens to Jane Protagonist, no matter how horrible her fiancé is to her, how twisted the relationship is between him and the brother, or how much care the author took to develop a winning plot, I'll lose interest.

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In his book, *Characters and Viewpoint* (Writer's Digest Books, 1999), author Orson Scott Card explains that vivid and memorable characters aren't born: they have to be made. And it's your job to make them both vivid and memorable. If you don't do it, who will?

Use description to paint clear pictures of your characters. How much description or the type you use, depends on your writing style and the genre for which you write, but you must paint a clear picture for your reader. This is crucial!

Characters should also be memorable. Many times when remembering a favorite book, you may find that most of the plot is now fuzzy to you, but the characters—or parts of them—continue to live inside your head.

CAREFULLY CONSTRUCT THE PLOT

A carefully constructed plot is also important. Though the element of suspense is critical only to certain genres, namely mysteries and psychological thrillers, the element of suspense can deepen the overall impact of any work of fiction.

The goal is to create tension from the very first page, to trap readers in the viscous web of suspense as early as possible, and to keep them there to the very end. Nancy Kress, author of *Beginnings, Middles, and Ends* (Writer's Digest, 1999) writes, "...you must hook a reader or editor in the first three paragraphs." Think about it. There are tens of thousands of books available to readers these days, not to mention other forms of entertainment. There are also tens of thousands of aspiring writers vying for the attention of agents, editors, and readers. You don't have much time to make an impression. Make a good one as quickly as you can.

Give your protagonist a difficult goal, then throughout the novel add complications. Give her a deadline and force her to make difficult choices. Convince the reader there's no solution; no way out. Always leave a question in the reader's mind. This will give them a great reason to continue on.

Prolong agony. By making life difficult for your protagonist, you'll inspire anticipation, even dread, in your readers. But dread is good! Stir readers' emotions whenever you can. Force them to empathize, to feel. That's what they want! They want to feel sad, angry, inspired, annoyed, excited. They want to be taken off guard. They paid for good entertainment; make sure you give it to them.

By writing intriguing characters and crafting a solid plot, you'll create a compulsive need to turn the page. They will skip meals, miss bedtimes, and (though not condoned) ignore spouses and friends until they reach the answers for which they've been searching. They'll keep turning the pages until they reach the end.

Conversely, draw readers in, but don't let them down. Nothing's worse than reaching the last pages of a book just to find that the ending is a letdown. Many books do that; don't let yours! Make yours a page turner...from the first to the very last page.

Jennifer Minar is a freelance writer in the writing and health & fitness markets. She is also the founder & managing editor of Writer's Break <http://www.writersbreak.com>, a web site and ezine for fiction and creative non-fiction writers; and Industry News @-a-Glance, an ezine for the retail pharmacy industry.

Teachers Explore New Methods For Teaching Literacy In Long Island Schools

By Patricia Hawke

Sachem School District teachers completed another professional development activity thanks to the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. The program is called the Strategic Instructional Model (SIM) and looks at how teachers can improve literacy in low performing adolescents

The Strategic Instructional Model

Developed over 25 years of research, SIM works to help teachers recognize what lessons are of greatest importance and target those lessons towards a diverse group of learners. SIM rests on four philosophical principles:

- Low proficiency students can be taught in mainstream classrooms.
- Teacher's aides, or support teachers, should concentrate on helping students develop learning strategies.
- Subject teachers should organize their lessons so that the material can be understood and remembered by low proficiency students.
- The students should be actively involved in deciding how to learn new strategies.

SIM works on two levels, one addressing the needs of the teacher and the other addressing the needs of the student. For teachers, SIM training provides a method for organizing information in ways that are most useful for students, so that they can understand what they learn and then be able to use it to accomplish tasks. For students, academic coaching develops learning strategies that can be applied to what they learn in school. These strategies range from learning ways to approach written texts, including informational readings and math word problems, as well as ways to express information in writing, as is often required on standardized tests.

Another important element of SIM is the way that it promotes teamwork among teachers, students, and parents. In deciding what content to teach to students, teachers and students work together to determine what information students need and what the best method of delivering that information is. This creates a feeling of comradery in the learning community and helps all stakeholders contribute to the overall success of students.

What Long Island Teachers are Saying About SIM

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Many classroom teachers have welcomed SIM as a concrete approach to meeting the needs of their students. After observing a demonstration writing lesson conducted using the method, teacher Jill Kristoff comments, "The SIM sentence writing strategy is a very useful tool for children, teaching them grammar and sentence structure, as well as improving their writing; and because it is taught in steps, children of all abilities can be successful with it!"

What Long Island Schools Students are Saying About SIM

Students agree with their teachers that SIM offers them a lot of structure for understanding what they are learning. After observing the demonstration lesson conducted by University of Kansas teacher - trainer Dottie Turner, one student said, "Ms. Turner helped me a lot with sentences. She taught me what a good sentence needs. Now my sentences are much better with details, and they are not boring." Another student also believed that she had benefited from the demonstration lesson and expressed her pride in participating in a professional development experience for her teacher. She commented: "The demo lesson was helpful to my writing. It was also a lot of fun. Teachers were sitting in the back, but they were not watching me. They were watching Ms. Turner. I loved that lesson!"

The Sachem School District community hopes that SIM will help local teachers and students achieve higher statewide assessment scores by including all students in the learning experience. The Strategic Instructional Model meets the guidelines for the No Child Left Behind Act and studies have shown improved academic performance for all students. Long Island schools welcome this added tool for improving the achievement of their students and look forward to implementing it on a broader level for their students.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12 , providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on Long Island schools visit



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