

# DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

FOR  
CREATIVE  
WRITERS

**JULES HORNE**

METHOD  
**WRITING**



Ready to step your creative writing up a gear?  
Discover the powerful dramatic secrets used by  
storytelling professionals.

For writing tips, review copies and more,  
join the mailing list at

**[www.method-writing.com](http://www.method-writing.com)**

Copyright © 2020 by Jules Horne. All rights reserved.

Texthouse, The Corn Exchange, Woodmarket, Kelso, TD5 7AT  
[www.texthouse.co.uk](http://www.texthouse.co.uk)

Dramatic Techniques for Creative Writers: Turbo-Charge Your Writing  
/ Jules Horne — 2nd ed.

Cover art: Cohorts by Design

ISBN

978-0-9934354-9-2 (paperback)

978-1-9164960-0-2 (ebook)

978-1-9164960-9-5 (hardback)

# Contents

Is This You?	xi
Introduction	xiii
<i>About Me</i>	
<i>Why I Wrote This Book</i>	
<i>What This Book Can Do For You</i>	
<i>What's So Great About Dramatic Techniques?</i>	
<i>How to Use This Book</i>	
<b>PART I</b>	<b>1</b>
<hr/>	
Dramatic Foundations	3
Space	6
Visualizing Space	8
<i>Wide shot (WS)</i>	
<i>Full shot (FS)</i>	
<i>Mid shot or medium shot (MS)</i>	
<i>Close up (CU) and extreme close up (ECU)</i>	
Mental Spaces	25
Dramatic monologue	26
Meet the imaginary listener	27
Friend or foe?	28
Mental geography	30
Cognitive maps and metaphors	33
Asides	35
Adverbs	37
Frame narrators	39

Playful & poetic	41
<b>Time</b>	<b>43</b>
The dramatic unity of time	44
A day like no other	46
Ticking clocks	47
Epic time	47
Imagining time	49
Real time	50
Slowing time	51
Foregrounding	52
Time sequence	54
Speeding up time	55
Cuts on rising action	56
Montage	57
Past and present	58
Flashback	61
Framed time	63
<b>Dramatic Action</b>	<b>68</b>
Why are car chases dramatically boring?	69
The “question of the scene”	70
Dramatic action - the beating heart of story	72
Actions	73
<b>Tension</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Scene</b>	<b>78</b>
Ending scenes on rising action	82
<b>Beats</b>	<b>86</b>
Breaking down beats	87
Subtext	88
<b>Wants and Stakes</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Objects</b>	<b>96</b>
<i>Immovable objects (tree, boulder, skip, house)</i>	
<i>Movable objects (table, car, throne)</i>	
<i>Portable objects (guitar, vase, fishing rod)</i>	
<i>Living objects (dog, hen, snake)</i>	
<i>Objects as character (doll, mask, volleyball)</i>	

<i>Small objects (ring, key, pebble)</i>	
<i>Wearable objects</i>	
<b>Physicality</b>	<b>105</b>
<i>Bold actions (chop, run, upturn, feed)</i>	
<i>Unusual actions (gut fish, play ice-hockey, mend shirt, build hut)</i>	
<i>Interior actions (think, ponder, wonder, fear)</i>	
<i>Physical force fields</i>	
<b>Contrast</b>	<b>114</b>
Amp up your antagonist	115
Subtext	116
Protagonist, antagonist, momentum	118
Contrast and setting	120
<b>Fatal Flaw</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>Status</b>	<b>126</b>
Sources of status	127
Status shift and scale	128
Subtle status shifts	129
<b>Show and Tell</b>	<b>132</b>
Show/tell in drama	134
<b>Spectacle</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>Improv</b>	<b>139</b>
Puppets, masks, the subconscious	140
Verbatim	141
<b>Secrets</b>	<b>144</b>
Secrets are physical	145
<b>Dramatic Irony</b>	<b>148</b>
Kinds of dramatic irony	149
<b>Obligatory Scene</b>	<b>152</b>
Time-stretching	153
Theme	153
<b>Catharsis</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>Fourth Wall</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Transformation</b>	<b>163</b>

---

Dramatic Thinkers	169
Konstantin Stanislavski	170
Erving Goffman	173
Performance Conventions	175
Performance consent	176
Front	178
Team collusion	179
Regions	181
Audience	183
Impression management	184
Aristotle	187
Abraham Maslow	191
Karl Iglesias	195
“Concept is the core of script. Concept sells”	196
Theme	197
Character	198
Recognition	199
Fascination	199
Mystery	199
Other techniques for character empathy	200
Story	200
Curiosity	200
Anticipation/hope/fear	201
Suspense	201
Structure	202
Other powerful techniques for emotional impact	202
Dara Marks	205
Gaston Bachelard	208
Keith Johnstone	213
Bibliography	218



<b>PART III</b>	<b>221</b>
And Finally☒	222
About Jules Horne	223
Method Writing Books	224
<i>Copywriting for Creative Writers</i>	
<i>How to Launch a Freelance Copywriting Business</i>	
<i>Writing for Audiobooks</i>	
Excerpt from <b><i>Writing for Audiobooks</i></b>	<b>227</b>



# Is This You?

Are you an author who wants to take your craft to another level?  
Are you a novelist, copywriter, scriptwriter or journalist keen to punch up your writing with powerful dramatic concepts?  
Are you a playwriting or scriptwriting student who wants a grasp of key dramatic writing techniques?  
A TV and film fan interested in writing skills?  
A teacher of creative writing students?  
Are you interested in dramatic writing secrets?

Join the Method Writing mailing list at  
**[www.method-writing.com](http://www.method-writing.com)**



# Introduction

Writers! Do you want to write with more impact?

Then you've come to the right place.

This book is full of ideas to turbo-charge your writing craft.

They come from the world of drama.

They're the secrets playwrights, screenwriters for TV and film and radio dramatists use on a daily basis to create stories that work before an audience.

Secrets that other writers often don't know about.

Why do I know this?

OK, meet Kelly. She's an author. Let's say a friend. She's written plenty, had some of it published. Even won some prizes. She's published journalism, fiction, non-fiction, poetry – you name it. She can spin a sentence. She's great at grammar, an excellent self-editor. She knows her stuff.

One day, she goes along to a writing workshop to learn to write her first play. How hard can it be? she thinks. Characters speak stuff. You write it down. Maybe it's even quicker than fiction?

Oh boy. That day, Kelly learns that there's a whole new world out there. A world of writing techniques. A world of powerful writing concepts. Practical writing craft. Everything just as useful for fiction, non-fiction and poetry as for script.

And all completely new to her.

It's transformative.

Fast-forward a short while and Kelly's a changed writer, in her fiction, non-fiction and everything else.

She's wrangling scenes, secrets, action and dialogue with new confidence. She's creating dynamic characters that are driven, clear and engaging. She knows how to structure stories for maximum impact and momentum, and make tough editing choices far more quickly. She has a feel for story and sentence rhythm, and her writing has far more life.

And through it all, she thinks: Why didn't I *know* this? I'm a published author. This is dynamite. Why is it hidden from view?

And some of her thought: I could keep this all to myself. Because it was like discovering a secret stash of writing gold.

And then she wondered: Why don't dramatists share this gold? Maybe they want to keep it secret?

Then she realised: They don't often talk technique to other writers. So it stays in the industry bubble. A big shiny stash of writing gold, hidden in plain sight.

Then she decided to come clean and speak in the first person. Kelly is of course me, but she's thousands of other authors who have woken up to the power of dramatic techniques. People from fiction, screen, copywriting and journalism who are hungry for craft and want to write and edit at a higher level.

Writers are increasingly multimodal, and jump between print, web, script, podcasting, audiobooks and spoken word. Write for the ear and for performance as well as the eye. And more than that: they want to write boldly. With more impact.

In this book, I share what I've learned on my journey from writer to dramatic writer.

These craft skills have changed my fiction and non-fiction approach in powerful ways. They've given me new concepts for tackling any kind of writing with confidence. They've helped to speed up my planning, structuring and editing. They've got me writing commissions and given me an industry-level understanding of narrative technique.

I was unbelievably excited to discover these techniques. And at the same time baffled, because no one ever told me they existed. Even though I was an aspiring writer hungry to learn, I'd never encountered most of them.

This below-the-radar situation is starting to change. More and more, fiction writers are reading up on structure and dramaturgy, and passing on what they've learned about story, arcs, and dramatic action.

But there's plenty more gold to mine from the world of drama. Kelly has been the long way round:

- \* Endless dramaturgy workshops.
- \* Devouring books by Aristotle, McKee, Mamet, Vogler, Stanislavski, Marks, Aronson, Iglesias, Johnstone, Berne – all brimful of nuggets.
- \* A whole summer of reading Shakespeare, taking notes, asking: How does he *do* that? Not to mention other scriptwriters and great teachers.
- \* A deep-dive into narratology, psychology, discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics.
- \* Watching box sets, notebook in hand. Lots of box sets.
- \* Feeding back on hundreds of writers' works in progress, till my editorial skills are sharper than a Stanley knife.

And you're welcome to do all that, too!

Or you can cut to the chase, and simply read this book.

It includes the best nuggets from dramatic technique in clear, distilled form, so you can put them into action in your writing right away.

And a warning: It will transform the way you see films, TV, story and pretty well all human interaction. Are you ready? Let's go!

## About Me

I'm an award-winning playwright and fiction writer, and I teach on a creative writing MA at a UK university.

Since I was tiny, I've loved reading, plays, films and stories. I've always written. I still love it more than anything else. And I still learn something new each day.

What's more unusual is that I'm multimodal. I write across different writing disciplines: scripts, fiction, journalism, web copy, poetry and lyrics. I've worked professionally in broadcast journalism, too. So, I've learned a wide range of writing techniques.

My writing mix includes fiction and over a dozen professional stage and BBC radio plays, two of them Edinburgh Fringe First winners.

I used to think being a multimodal writer was a problem. But now I realise it's ahead of the curve. The rise of the web, video and audiobooks means writing platforms are converging. The next generation of writers will be multimodal. In education, there are even conferences on the topic now.

So if you're like me and you're excited by the potential, this is a good place to start.

## Why I Wrote This Book

I was sitting in a rehearsal room, with a group of experienced actors, and not the slightest clue about the foundations of dramatic writing.

It was my first script. I was a published fiction writer and journalist, but scriptwriting was new.

Story, characters, description, dialogue – sure. This was all familiar territory. I could weave a sentence, tell a story, make a character speak.

But people were using a completely different language to talk about the writing in front of us. Terms like status play, fourth wall, beats, actioning, split focus, arcs, journeys, flow were racing around the room. What was going on? I began to sweat.



The director pointed to a scene in my script and asked: “Whose reality is this?” My head nearly fell off.

In dramatic writing, people were using a whole slew of different techniques and concepts I hadn’t heard of. Some were different words for familiar ideas, but many were entirely new to me.

They’d not only been using them for centuries. They’d been honing them before the most demanding audience of all – the living, breathing, impatient, hungry, fidgety and wonderful general public!

Call myself a writer? I’d hardly begun. I needed to sharpen up, and fast. I needed to get to grips with those techniques and tools. They were powerful. They were transformative. Some of them blew my mind.

So I looked for a book to set me right.

But there wasn’t one.

No single book on the main dramatic techniques for writers new to that world.

So I had to work it all out on my own.

This was the start of a humbling, exciting, and powerful journey.

A journey into the world of dramatic writing, its craft and concepts. Thinkers and practitioners. Psychology, sociology and language. Stagecraft. Writing for people. Performers, characters and audience. What works in a room. Devouring films, TV and plays. Making notes. Dissecting. Trying things out. And above all, a practical, life-changing apprenticeship in the hands of experienced actors and directors.

I always wanted to be the best writer I could be, and earn access to that exciting world. It was far from easy.

I wrote this for my younger self, and for you, ambitious professional writers, so that you get there less painfully, and faster. Really for any writer who needs the helping hand I needed back then.

## What This Book Can Do For You

If you're a **writer new to dramatic techniques**, the concepts in this book will blow your mind (as they did mine).

Imagine - a world of writing going on right under your nose, in action every time you watch TV, see a film, go to the theatre.

And you've no idea how it's done.

Sometimes, writers think scripts are just about writing great dialogue.

If that's you, hold onto your hat!

If you're an **ambitious writer looking for clear, powerful writing strategies**, this book will give you a treasure-chest.

You'll learn about shaping tension and time, using props to bring scenes alive, robust techniques for structure and editing.

You'll become bolder and more confident in shaping ideas.

You'll discover tools other writers still don't know about.

If you're an **experienced writer or writing teacher**, this book will inspire you in new directions.

You'll learn new skills to give your writing greater impact.

You'll sharpen your grasp of story, space and time.

You'll be more confident about developing ideas with editors, publishers and those you teach.

You'll also find an overview of

- \* influential thinkers and their main ideas
- \* further reading to take you deeper.

So! Are you ready to get started?

## What's So Great About Dramatic Techniques?

Dramatic techniques are ancient. They've stood the test of time. They've been proven over hundreds of years. In front of live audiences ready to laugh, cry, or chuck tomatoes.

For centuries, dramatic writers have learned from live, unfiltered feedback - the ultimate market research. So, they've learned a trick or two.

Believe me, you can totally feel it when an audience doesn't get your eloquent speech, doesn't laugh at your hilarious joke, or switches off in boredom.

You feel every line that's out of whack. Every little self-indulgence.

You feel exactly when a word is too many, too few, or just right.

You feel it with your entire body.

That joke that jars a tiny bit in rehearsal - cut it. You put it in front of an audience, it's magnified a thousandfold. So, you become very clear about what needs to be cut or changed.

You don't want to leave it till the moment when you're in the theatre, amongst the audience, watching your play, and a complete stranger falls asleep by your side.

It was very hot, and he'd had an exhausting day. And it wasn't my play. It was a friend's. Yes, a friend's.

But with live audience feedback, there's nowhere to hide.

It's painful. And painful or not, you learn an amazing amount from it, and from other scriptwriters who put themselves through the same mill.

Over the centuries, this live trial by audience has distilled into a range of powerful dramatic techniques. It means drama insiders have a professional shorthand that helps them enormously in writing their scripts.

In the future, audiences will be wired up to machines, and other writers will learn what dramatists have always known.

In fact, it's already happening in film - with facial monitoring, biometrics, fMRI scans... It's called neuro-cinematics, and it's enough to put you off your popcorn!

But really, it's just a high-tech version of what experienced dramatists know from instinct.

And thankfully, technology will never completely fathom the unpredictable, shape-shifting live audience. Audiences are

different, context is important, and even the time of day, current events and what they've just eaten or drunk can affect how a story goes down.

And if it were easy to write dramatically, everyone would do it brilliantly, and every play, film or TV show would be brilliant. Which isn't the case.

So, why make the effort to learn dramatic techniques? Because

- \* they're emotionally powerful
- \* they've been thoroughly audience-tested, sometimes over centuries
- \* they're bold and amplify your ideas
- \* they're clear and can travel
- \* they add a big extra string to your writing bow.

And here's the thing:

Dramatic techniques help you to step back from the close-up level of words. So, you can see the bigger picture of what you're writing.

Not just words, but story shapes and arcs. And not just shapes across a story, but also shapes across a scene, and shapes within it: objects, time, space, place, action, relationships between things, place and people, and how they all flow together.

They help you step beyond words, and orchestrate the multidimensional shapes and patterns of your writing.

They're that powerful.

## **How to Use This Book**

I want this book to be practical and well used. I hope you'll scribble in it, fold the corners (or add highlights to the e-book) and add your own notes and discoveries.

If you don't like writing on books, get a hardback notebook for your viewing notes. The more you watch films, TV and plays in a mindful way, with notebook in hand, the more you'll learn for your own writing.

I suggest you skim-read the book once, to get a sense of what's in it.

Then cherry-pick the chapters that seem most useful for your writing. Do any exercises that jump out at you.

Finally, read each chapter slowly, and do the other exercises.

And importantly, after you do any writing, take time to reflect on what worked and didn't, and on what you've learned.

This reflective time often gets missed out, but it's vital. It's when your brain sees and consolidates learning. So it's very productive, and will turbo-charge your understanding and help it stick.

That's how courses work on the distance university education I teach.

And if you're the methodical type of writer, you can work through the book chronologically, as a self-study course.

You can also use it as a writing or teaching reference. Each section gives a suggestion of what to do next. There's also a recommended reading list for deeper insights into key topics.

Or maybe you're at an impasse, and looking for writing inspiration? If that's you, use the exercises as a lucky-dip or random stimuli, to help kick-start the next part of your scene or project.

So, let's get started. Happy writing! And don't forget to make notes in your writer's notebook.



# PART I





# Dramatic Foundations

The dramatic foundations up ahead are the cornerstones of dramatic writing.

Professionals in the performing arts know this stuff. It's a shared language. A shorthand that helps them to discuss work in progress effectively.

Writers with other writing backgrounds have often heard of these concepts. But typically, I've found that they don't use them in the same specific and practical ways.

Try thinking of writing as a body. Words are the clothes – what you see on the surface. They can be loud or quiet, patterned or pretty or revealing, well groomed or just thrown on, look-at-me shrieking neon, or minimalist low-impact grey. Words are the surface of your writing. They're what readers see and hear first.

Dramatic techniques, on the other hand, are the bones and muscles of the body. They're under the surface of the clothes. The framework that holds everything together.

To continue the analogy: you can have strong bones and muscles, or you can have a loose jumble in a rattling bag. A “large, loose baggy monster”, if you like. That's how the novelist Henry James described poorly shaped novels. “Large loose baggy monsters” full of the “accidental and the arbitrary”, where anything goes. And the phrase is so vivid that it has stuck as a warning of what not to do, if you want to write an engaging, compelling novel.

So where do bones and muscles fit with dramatic techniques? Well, they're what give stories shape, tension, momentum and impact.

When you watch a film or play, you feel its bones and muscles, through the emotional journey you experience. The emotional rollercoaster, if you like. With an emotional journey, you're not feeling the individual words, you're feeling the underlying shape. The journey, the ride.

It's a bit like when you listen to music, whether it's a big symphony with a grand finale or a subtle song with a hooky chorus.

You can feel an emotional journey on a big scale, through the overall story arc – for example, the way you feel at the climax of a powerful film.

Or you can feel it moment by moment, in the ebb and flow of tension and release.

Again, like listening to music: You can be swept up in the build and swell of a beautiful song. And you can be moved by individual phrases, riffs and chords.

When you're emotionally immersed in a journey like this, you're often hardly aware of individual words.

You're feeling those story bones and muscles.

Now, most writers want to get below the surface of words. They want to make an emotional connection with their readers.

But when you're writing and editing, you're close-up, wrangling individual words. The speed of writing words and the speed of experiencing story as a reader are very different. And it can be hard to detach enough to experience the story with fresh, new reader eyes.

So, it's really helpful for writers to have tools to help them wrangle their writing through a different frame. One that holds the writer away from the words.

This is where dramatic techniques really come into their own.

They provide building blocks at different scales and through different dimensions.

A bit like cogs in engineering. They can be tiny inside a watch, big inside a submarine or huge enough to support a bridge. Yet they still have the same shape and essence.

This next section starts with a zoom through two of drama's major building blocks: time and space. They're two of the key concepts in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which has had a huge influence on Western dramatic thinking.

These sections on time and space are followed by concepts for writing scenes, then other aspects of dramatic craft.

All the dramatic concepts are interdependent and feed into each other, just like cogs in a machine.

So you can read each section as a standalone. But they also act as lenses on each other, as alternative routes into the territory. For example, it's hard to talk about dramatic irony without talking about secrets, and vice versa. It's hard to talk about character wants and stakes without touching on fatal flaw and dramatic action.

So, each section will cross-refer you to others that are linked. Try following the threads to see where they lead. You'll eventually find everything links up into a cross-weave of interconnected dimensions.

Now, although this sounds a lot to take in, in practice, there are just a few key techniques that come up time after time. So get to grips with those, and you'll easily take your writing to a whole new level.

Let's dive first into the biggest concept of them all: Space.

# Space

*Learn powerful ways to visualize your story and its world.*

The spatial concepts from film and stage are incredibly powerful for writers. Often, a space or place is the starting point for a story, or for a scene.

Imagine an empty space where anything can happen. Suddenly, a character arrives and a story magically starts.

Imagine a picture frame with a place inside it, ready to draw us right in and experience a story.

A space is a way into a world.

And the ways stories work spatially in film and stage have a lot to teach writers from other disciplines.

It's where I've had most to learn as a fiction writer moving into scripts.

Space is one of the three “dramatic unities” come down to us from Aristotle. He's the grandfather of dramatic theory, in a direct line to all the modern story gurus – Robert McKee, Syd Field, even Joseph Campbell, who wrote *The Hero's Journey*.

Aristotle's three dramatic unities of space, time and action are very useful tools for shaping story.

And space is a key ingredient of dramatic technique. A good handle on space and scenes will transform your writing.

The best way to understand scenes clearly is to use visualization techniques. You'll immediately be able to see their impact and potential, and edit far more confidently and productively.

So, let's get cracking!

# Visualizing Space

Visualizations can really help writers to understand how to use space. When you write, you're trying to create pictures in the mind of your reader. But how do you know the crystal-clear image in your head is reaching your reader?

This clarity gap is the biggest problem I see in new writing. Writers think they're communicating clearly, because it's there in glorious technicolour, in their heads. But their words only cover a tiny fraction of what the reader needs to see. Or focus on the wrong things, in the wrong order, so the reader sees unrelated fragments and can't piece them together.

How can you create a clear picture for your reader, covering the right things, in the right order?

Film thinking can really help. Film is a visual medium. To take the audience on a journey, film makers use 'master shots', and weave them together. They have precise control over what we see, and when.

What's more, they understand how to use visual parameters to create precise emotional effects. They can influence whether we feel close-up intimacy, cool judgment, laughter, tears, or alienation.

The amazing filmmaker Charlie Chaplin said this: 'Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.' A tragedy in close-up, a comedy in long-shot.

Viewpoint affects emotional impact. Filmmakers understand this very clearly, and break it down and discuss it all the time. They have to use master shots, because they're collaborating with teams of people. So they get used to combining creativity with a systematic approach.

Writers also talk about viewpoint. They wrangle first person, third person, free indirect style, knowing and unreliable narrators. So there's some similarity with film. But fiction viewpoint is incredibly fluid. It can dart easily into the past, the future, dreams, thoughts, across the galaxy and inside an atom very easily. That freedom is wonderful, but it also comes with pitfalls. You can lose your reader on the way.

So for a storyteller, thinking about a film crew lugging a camera, setting it up, waiting for the right light and moment, can be really helpful.

That effort and cost means the director has to make very clear, effective choices.

So a director invests a lot of advance time studying emotional effects, storytelling craft, techniques. And they're techniques that can really benefit writers.

In my experience, fiction writers rarely think or study this way. They often outline the story, and maybe the scenes, but they rarely frame the shots, or the order of shots.

But there's a lot to learn from doing this, particularly by looking at storyboarding and cinematography. Cinematography is about the composition of shots – their look, appearance and what's in the frame. Storyboarding is the order of shots, and how your audience travels through the story. Every decision is calculated for clarity and emotional impact on the audience.

Now, this isn't about turning you into a scriptwriter. Film and cinematography are their own specialism. But even a basic knowledge can give you extremely useful tools for fiction. It can help you clarify your visual and spatial ideas. Make them bolder, with more powerful impact. And above all, control how your reader experiences the story.

And the great thing is, you can do this without paying a crew and lugging a camera around.

For example, maybe your chapter lacks focus. If so, you could try tighter framing. Get in closer to the characters. Maybe start with a wide-shot to establish context, and move in through a mid-shot to a close-up.

Or maybe you have a problem with head-hopping? A viewpoint that jumps in and out of heads, or sprayguns around the scene, looking at a clutter of details? Film shot framing can really help.

Or, maybe your characters feel unengaging? Could it be that your viewpoint is too detached? Maybe you have a far-off, god-like viewpoint but want your reader to connect with your characters? Again, film framing and understanding the impact of close-ups can help.

Or, maybe the pace is too slow? Film techniques apply to storytelling time as well as space. Time is covered in the next section. But time and space are inextricably linked. So start with space, and take it from there.

In short, film visualization techniques can help you structure your fiction storytelling for maximum impact. You'll be able to edit more quickly, effectively and confidently. And once you've mastered the techniques, you'll be able to write more quickly, too.

Here's an example from when I was working with a fiction writer. Let's call her Jan.

Like many new writers, Jan was trying to cram in far too much at the start of her novel. She had introduced a lot of descriptive detail, thinking this would help to bring the setting to life. But it was scattergun, jumping from one thing to the next. As a reader, I had to jump around mentally, and it was confusing. Despite all the detail, I still couldn't get properly oriented in the story.

But imagine the film equivalent. Your friend has a new video camera, and they're pointing it at everything in sight. From the sofa to the TV to through the window, into the garden, their child's smile, a door opening, and a closeup on the murder weapon lying bloodied on the floor.



Well, not in your friend's house, but you get the picture. It's like a spraygun. Instant vertigo! To the reader, leaping from detail to detail without a clear, controlled direction of travel, feels confusing. It feels unmoored, without an anchor, messy. The reader will switch off, though they may not be able to explain why. The film metaphor can help.

By thinking about film shots, Jan was able to organise a clear way in. An establishing shot on a suburban street, then into the house, sketch in some colour, and then in for a close-up on the murder weapon. Anything that distracted from a clear direction of travel could be cut, or moved into a better place in the sequence. The result? A clear, compelling opening that took the reader on a journey and painted the picture at the moment when it was needed.

So, as a way into visual thinking about space, let's now look at the different film master shots, and what impact they're used for. And don't worry about precise definitions here. Shot names are just a practical shorthand for the film industry. They're not set in stone, but they're extremely helpful for thinking about fiction setting, scene and viewpoint.

## **Wide shot (WS)**

*A large-scale view. Often a landscape or streetscape, taking in a large chunk of space.*

Imagine a desert planet with two moons. Or a road with a beat-up car. Or a banquet table with loads of guests.

Wide shots cover a big space – anything from panoramic to the sweep of a room.

It's a fairly elastic kind of shot. But what's important is that a wide shot gives context for the characters. Because it gives the context, and the relationship between characters and their world, it's fantastic for heavy lifting. And it's great for story exposition – the backdrop to the story.

In film, wide shots are often used for orientation. You'll hear this called an "establishing" shot. It sets the scene. When you know the setting, and the relationship between the characters and their world, you immediately get a snapshot, a signpost, and a quick way into the story. It also has a particular emotional impact, which I'll go into shortly.

So a wide shot for context is tremendously helpful.

In fiction, the equivalent might be sketching in: a wide, dusty road, and two dark figures far away. Or a mediaeval hall with music and a banquet in full swing. Or a shop window full of glamorous ball gowns.

You immediately have an invitation into a world, and know the character context. Surely, it goes without saying that these must be used all the time?

Well, no. Wide shots are great, but they have a particular emotional effect. A particular viewpoint. They feel emotionally detached.

And you may not want your audience, or reader, to feel emotionally detached from your characters.

With wide shots, you're placing the viewer far from the action, looking on. The effect is emotionally detached. A movie consisting entirely of wide shots would feel at a remove and epic, and the characters distanced, even ant-like. An example of this is the experimental film *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance*. It shows distance shots of people, cityscape, landscape, clouds. The people are often speeded up and look like swarming bees. It has a hypnotic, repetitive soundtrack. The viewpoint is god-like. You're looking on, from a great distance. The viewpoint is the opposite of immersion and inclusion in that world.

*Koyaanisqatsi* is an extreme example. More typically, when wide shots are used, you get a wide shot followed by a closer-in shot of an interior, or characters.

For example, in the TV series *Friends*, you often see an outdoor wide shot of the apartment block, then it cuts to the interior of the apartment.

The journey from detached wide shot to a mid-shot brings you closer to the characters - literally and emotionally.

The effect on the reader is that you're being led into the story.

A wide establishing shot is often used as a visual shorthand. You don't need to close in gradually on a character. You can cut straight there. The viewer understands the convention.

The technique is so familiar to us that TV directors often create the context by using stock shots. Say, a Swiss mountain landscape, followed by a hut interior, shot in a movie studio. The audience easily makes the necessary imaginative leap.

You can place the shots the other way round, too: from close-up, out to wide shot, for a different emotional effect. One minute, you're close in with the romantic couple, lying on the grass. Then we pull away and see the surrounding countryside. Pulling away like this frames the character within a big landscape. Sometimes even a huge, epic landscape – the desert or the mountain top. This can create a sense of isolation, or a sense of grandeur, evoking the human spirit in a tough environment.

The fiction equivalents of wide shots, close-ups and other film shots can alert you to viewpoint issues. They help you, for example, notice dizzy zooming in, or contradictory direction of travel. This helps greatly with editing your writing for better flow.

**TRY THIS:**

The openings of scenes are crucial to engaging your reader with the story. I like to use the word “cogging”, like the cogs of a wheel. Get your reader clogged with the story, then use clear flow and travel to keep the momentum going.

Try this out, by sketching a scene with a wide shot. Use words that give a sense of spaciousness and scale, the bigger picture. For example:

*The sun was setting over the horizon...*

Write a short sentence of your own that sketches in some scenery at this big scale. This will establish a clear perspective, and give us a clear entry point to the scene.

Then, trying homing in on the character. Still a wide shot, but a bit closer in:

*Jem trudged along the drove road...*

Write your own next sentence at this closer scale.

Then try closer in still – a full shot, taking in Jem’s whole body.

*He pulled his coat tighter and his hat down hard against the chill wind.*

Note that visually, the effect is like a camera zooming in, from extreme wide shot to closer in. You’re creating the illusion of visual travel, and transmitting it to your reader stage by stage.

How does it feel to your mind’s eye?

### **TRY THIS:**

Try experimenting with pace in your scene-setting. Now write a version of your opening where you flesh out the wide shot more. Give it a bit more detail.

*The sun was setting over the horizon, turning the sky a lurid pink. The light was fading fast, and it would soon be hard to see the road. If it could be called a road...*

What does your new sentence feel like? Does it give a sense of space and bring the landscape to life? Or do you feel the need to cut to your character quicker? The answer will depend on the mood you want to create, and your genre. You might want

to settle the reader in gradually. Or you might want to sweep them off their feet for a fast-paced ride.

There's no right or wrong here. It's best to master different ways of playing with time, so that you have different techniques up your sleeve

If your pace doesn't vary, whether it's fast or slow, it'll quickly get boring for the reader.

You're aiming for a sweet spot between enough variety for interest, without overshooting into confusion.

Now, expand the second of your two "shots" – the closer-in, full shot, showing the general impression of your character. Develop what we see – maybe a general picture of what they're wearing, their silhouette or way of walking.

Do you feel your mind's eye staying with the general impression, or wanting to home right in, or darting about? Where do you feel the need to focus next?

When might you use this "closing in" approach? Think about how it might work in different genres.

### **TRY THIS:**

Now, mix things up. Try some wide shots mixed with closer-in sentences, either extra detail at a close-up scale, or with a wildly diverging focus. For example:

*The sun was setting over the horizon, and the moles were burrowing through the soil...  
Jem trudged along the drove road, as starlings roosted in the trees...*

These are extreme shifts in viewpoint! Try writing some extreme and some more subtle variations. What's the effect? How does your mind's eye respond to each?

What would the effect be, if this were filmed?

### **TRY THIS:**

Now, write a sentence or paragraph with the wide and closer-in shots the opposite way around. That is, from close in, to extreme wide shot.

*The sweat broke out on Jem's brow and trickled down under his collar. He trudged along the drove road as the sun dropped below the hill.*

What's the effect of this technique? How does it make you feel about the character? Where does it place you emotionally in relation to the character?

When might you use this technique?

Note: These viewpoint experiments aren't about turning your fiction into film writing.

The conventions of fiction are different to film. One of the wonderful characteristics of fiction is that it can travel fluidly in time and space, including mental space, and sweep the reader along.

But sometimes, writers push that fluidity too far, create confusion, and lose their readers. Using film shots can help you understand viewpoint and how it travels, and control the impact on your readers more effectively.

### **Full shot (FS)**

*A whole-body shot.*

A full shot lets us see the character's whole body, from head to toe. It gives a general first impression.

The full shot was particularly popular in the early days of cinema. Early movies were often filmed in theatres, where you see the human scale. Audiences were used to taking in the whole person in real-life proportions.

Directors were still getting used to the intimacy of closer-in shots.

A full shot lets you see a character's body movements - their stride or shuffle, the swing of their arms, the hunch of their shoulders. It lets you see how they cover ground and take up space in a room. These movements give a sense of the character's personality, at a glance.

Full shots also show some of the context around the characters, so they can also give a sense of their social surroundings - their workplace, or where they live.

However, this viewpoint is more emotionally detached than a mid-shot or close-up. We're seeing the characters from a distance, beyond the range of human touch. Thinking of the other senses, we can hear them only when they shout, or talk loudly. We can't hear the detail of ordinary conversation, unless the surroundings are very quiet.

The full shot can be used as mid-way point after a wide shot, to bring us closer in to the character. Or, like the wide shot, it can be used as an establishing shot. Then, to get within natural earshot of the character, you'd probably want to close in further, to a mid shot.

**TRY THIS:**

Taking the wide shot sentence or paragraph you wrote, develop the character further, in a full shot. For example:

*Jem trudged along the drove road, a hunched figure in a black coat and heavy boots.*

At this scale, think about gait, shape, how the character takes up space. What's the first impression, if you saw this person and didn't know them? Write that first. Then close in and give a little more detail, though still not a close-up. Perhaps their arms, their sense of purpose, what they're carrying, for example:

*His hands were stuffed deep into his pockets against the cold, and his scarf wrapped so thick that his face couldn't be seen.*

Where does your mind's eye want to go next?

### **TRY THIS:**

In full shots, clothes are important. They give a crucial first impression. What stands out in your character? What's emblematic? Maybe a colour or item of clothing? Maybe their silhouette?

Fashion designers and fashion eras often have signature silhouettes - the A line, the New Look, the Vivienne Westwood bustle. Think about your character's silhouette. Are their clothes tight or loose? Short, or long and sweeping? Heavy and sculptural, or light and fluid, full of motion?

Try observing people in the street with your eyes half-closed. If they were characters, what would be the dominant impression?

Use your observations to write some full shot sentences.

### **TRY THIS:**

Develop your sense of the full shot viewpoint more, by focusing on action. Again, what's the dominant impression? Are they agitated, purposeful, or still?

Where is your character heading? What's the direction of travel, or dramatic intention, of their movement? What verbs express that energy, intensity and purpose? Think about an actor conveying that character.

Does Jem stride, sashay, scuttle or thunder?

Now, write some new full shot material to insert into your paragraph.

Also try inserting a wide short element into the full section. What's the effect? Can you feel the difference in mental "travel" for the reader?

When might you use a full shot in your writing?



## Mid shot or medium shot (MS)

*A waist-to-head shot.*

A mid shot is still closer in. It places us close to the characters, showing them essentially from the waist up. At this distance, we can see their interaction, and hear what they're saying. With this closer-in framing, we can probably hear their natural, public dialogue – everyday conversation. However, we might struggle to hear whispered or intimate dialogue.

On screen, a mid shot is by far the most used kind of shot. It's familiar because it's similar to the way we experience people we're talking to in a room. We're close enough to hear them and see them clearly. So in film, this kind of shot is strongly associated with realism and documentary.

The mid shot is a half-way house between full shot and close-up. It allows us to hear conversation, but doesn't have the intimacy of close-up.

With a mid shot, you can clearly see a character's face, hairstyle, colouring, expression. You'll also see more detail of their clothes - a sense of texture, and prominent patterns, for example. But you won't see the characters' bitten nails, Adam's apple or tiny stud earrings.

In movies and especially in interviews, mid shot is the dominant shot for dialogue between characters.

So, what about writing? Here's an example of midshot. Note, there's more detail and gesture, but not right up close:

*Lara turned to him with a smile. "You took your time".*

*She clipped the pen to her clipboard, and nodded toward the shiny glass door.*

For comparison, here's Jem in full shot.

*Jem trudged along the drove road, a hunched figure in a black coat and heavy boots.*

And Lara in mid shot again:

*Lara turned to him with a smile. “You took your time”.*

*She clipped the pen to her clipboard, and nodded toward the shiny glass door.*

Through the writing, you’re showing the reader what they can see. If they can see a pen, they’re in pretty close. If they’re seeing a hunched figure on a drove road, they’re pretty far away. And you have complete control over what you invite them to see.

Of course, the film shots aren’t that cut and dried, and the human imagination certainly isn’t. So writing can be far more fluid. You can take the reader with you.

There are countless creative possibilities and combinations.

Filmmakers often play around with the scale of visuals, and the sound might be in a different viewpoint to the visual. For example, you often see a panoramic wide shot of characters walking far off in the landscape, while we hear their close-up voices. It doesn’t have to be realistic.

But being aware of shots will help you make informed decisions about flow, scale, what’s natural and what’s experimental. Then you can make the appropriate choice for your genre and story.

### **TRY THIS:**

Develop your previous paragraph by writing a mid shot. With this framing, think of the characters’ stance, what they’re wearing, facial expression and hairstyle. What are they doing? Are they static, or in motion? Can you see their intention from their physical action?

Develop this mid shot into a full paragraph. Now, play around with mixing different shots into the mid shot – wide shot, full shot and close-up. What’s the effect?

As you arrange your shots, notice the visual “travel” - the spatial journey through the different shots in your mind’s

eye. Does it flow smoothly? Does anything jar? What's your preference? When might you choose each variation?

## **Close up (CU) and extreme close up (ECU)**

*Anything from a head-and-shoulder shot to someone's fingernails.*

A close up covers a wide range of different scales, from the natural close-up of close human contact to the heightened extreme close-up of very close or even microscopic proximity.

At close-up scale, you can see someone's teeth, wrinkles, the tilt of their head, and hear them murmur. At extreme close-up, you can see their chipped nail polish, shirt stains and tremors, and hear their breathing.

The key expressive quality of close-up is intimacy. Close-up and extreme close-up shots give us privileged insight. This can have different emotional effects, depending on the context.

For example, if the characters are familiar to us, a close-up draws us closer, inviting us to deepen our bond. But if they're unfamiliar, a close up can feel intrusive and even alienating. In some contexts, too, extreme close-ups can be used for comedic effect, as in looking up someone's nose, or focusing on the hole in their sock.

Close-ups are on a spectrum from naturalistic to unnatural, depending on how far they depart from normal human vision.

If you're into photography, it might be helpful to think of the different lenses: a 50mm lens mimics typical human vision, so it's used for full shot, and mid shot. A 17-40mm zoom is used for wide angle or wide shot. A lens upward of 50mm is used for macro shots – close-up, or extreme close-up.

A macro lens is often used to reveal mysteries and textures that are hidden from the everyday human gaze. *A drop of dew on a blade of grass. The wings of a moth.*

So how might this work in writing?

Fiction can easily zoom right into an extreme close-up. Tiny sensory details can create a sense of extraordinary intimacy and vividness.

*The dark red blemish on his cheek... the torn edge of her pocket... the yellow specks of paint on the carpet...*

These details put readers right up, nose to nose, with what the writer is describing.

Note that you don't have to say anything about the distance. You don't need overt signposts – for example, prepositions such as *near* or *close to*, or verbs such as *peered* or *squinted at*.

To bring your readers this close, all you need to do is choose and frame exactly what your readers see.

*The dark red blemish on his cheek... the torn edge of her pocket... the yellow specks of paint on the carpet...*

### **TRY THIS:**

Develop your paragraphs in progress by writing some close up and extreme close up detail. As you do this, think about not just the visual elements. Think of all the different senses, and what each brings.

At extreme close-up, touch, texture and smell become even more important.

Brainstorm texture and smell words for the situation you're describing. Do they work differently at this different scale?

### **TRY THIS:**

Close-up and extreme close-up don't just apply to description. They also apply to actions.

However, action words can change at these different scales. Readers are close enough to notice different nuances.

So, brainstorm verbs for the close-up viewpoint in your paragraph.

*His fingers shook as he opened the tin. Her hand grazed the torn edge of her pocket. He flicked a speck of ash onto the carpet.*

Compare them with the verbs for your full and wide shots. Do they have different sound qualities?

*Stride, thunder, sashay.  
Shook, grazed, flicked.*

### **TRY THIS:**

Write some extreme close-up description into your work in progress, and explore the effect. How does extreme close-up change how the reader is positioned emotionally towards the character? How easy is it to follow the “travel” in your mind’s eye?

Brainstorm some narrative situations where you might want to use extreme close-up. Why might you choose this viewpoint? Does genre play a role?

When and why might you choose to avoid extreme close-up?

### **TRY THIS:**

Choose a passage from your previous writing, or writing by someone whose work you admire. Use a highlighter pen to mark up descriptive language that suggests a particular type of shot.

How does the writer show how the reader is positioned, literally and emotionally?

Are we literally far away and detached, or close up and personal?

If you wanted to alter the focal length to bring the reader closer, or distance them more, which elements would you need to change?

Compare your own writing with a favourite published author's. What do you notice?

How might this thinking help your editing process?