

NOTES ON STEIN¹

Characterization

- Show, don't tell, and while doing is better
- Eccentricities are often the key to an interesting, well-rounded character
- Phoniness can also be a clue to the reader about the character
- Use contrast as a way to highlight elements (well-dressed man with his hand down his pants)
- Differences between characters (or within) leads to conflict
- Delineate characters through markers (both cultural and individual): clothing, location, cleanliness, treatment of children and animals, accessories, manners, mannerisms, transportation, food and drink, language, occupation, accent, knowledge, habits, attitudes

Plots

- Central element of a plot is thwarted desire, and the action that results
- The character (and thus the reader) has to want it bad
- The protagonist's desire should be in conflict with the antagonist's (or with other obstacles) and the two are bound together in some inescapable way
- The two desires (pro and con) must be important, necessary, and urgent
- The desires should be believable, at least to their holders, if the reader is to buy into the conflict
- The details of the desire develop out of and help define the character who holds it
- Classic motivations: money, love, power, justice, revenge...
- *What* people do is plot, *how* they do it is characterization (so say I)

Drama

- In scenes: give characters in a scene different 'scripts' or beliefs (about a situation/desires/goals/intent) and watch the conflict begin!
- In the plot as a whole: confine the characters in a Crucible as a way to heat up the action and conflict. Crucible: a physical or motivational environment that they can't or won't leave: a common goal, a relationship or a closed environment like a prison, ship, family, company, etc.

Suspense

- Prospective or actual danger or confrontation; an old fear may become real, or the character is placed in a life crisis that requires action
- Leave an action in suspense while the character thinks or does something else; leave something hanging at the end of each scene; move to a different location, character or action in the next scene
- Eliminate weak scenes, those without tight action or conflict
- Don't give the reader what they want! If it's danger to be avoided, plunk them right in it, if it's a million dollars, make sure they don't get it.

¹ Stein, Sol. 1995. *Stein on Writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Tension

- Happens within scenes (in *Cast Away*, wondering if Hanks would escape the island produced suspense, and waves threatening to pull his raft back out to sea provided tension)
- Give stress, strain and pressure, don't relieve it
- Cause friction and don't relieve it (if one character gives an order, have another disobey it and voila! tension)
- State a "fact" that's disturbing or inspires curiosity ("John Ramie was executed at 7:08 on the hottest day on record." What's that all about? Was there enough power to electrocute him? Was it awful?)
- Plot situations provide tension: dangerous work, looming deadline, an unfortunate meeting, a closed environment, two people who don't like each other (or do)
- As soon as one source of tension is released, introduce another – this is easier if you alternate story lines or perspectives

Dialogue

- Dialogue isn't boring, repetitive, reflective; in short, it is not actual speech
- Good confrontational dialogue is like action, and moves the story along in the same way
- Can be used to develop plot and characterization together
- Is indirect and oblique: doesn't necessarily answer a posed question, but sidesteps in ways that move the story forward; as when the characters have different scripts
- It is a semblance of speech with its effect, but not its form
- It gives words' meaning and emotion
- What counts is not what's said but the effect of what is meant
- What's the dialogue's purpose? To begin or heighten conflict? Get the reader curious? Create tension? Build to a climax, turn of events, or relationship change?
- Check that the dialogue fits with its character, isn't clichéd, doesn't echo another character's lines.
- Questions can't be too direct or oblique answers will seem rude ("How was lunch?" instead of "Did you go out for lunch?")
- Differentiate each characters' dialogue with speech markers: vocabulary, run-on sentences, throwaway phrases, tight or loose wording, sarcasm, cynicism, poor grammar, omitted words, inappropriate modifiers, etc.
- Jargon marks the speaker as stuffy
- Use word order, omissions or additions, and rhythm instead of dialect.

Credibility

- Central, especially as extraordinary things should happen but also be believable (at least within the confines of the story), with credible motivations
- Planting: preparing the ground for something (usually an action or discovery) to come later – this is required when a later action might seem unconvincing without some foundation
- The key to credibility is to be confident that the characters' motivations or abilities make their actions plausible
- There always has to be a reason for an action: if A trips B and B falls down, you have to first plant A's motivation (but not B's)

- Truly crazy people are seldom interesting, unless their actions are motivated in some way that the reader can understand (random action isn't interesting)
- Particularity: detail that individualizes a character, action or place; be concrete without over-specifying
- Evoke, don't emote
- Just say no to the superficial, the clichéd, or exaggerated approaches
- Evoke, don't announce or fabricate feeling
- If the story is a farce, then actions aren't required to meet any standard of credibility

Editing Flab

- Words that are usually flab: however, almost, entire, successive, respective, perhaps, always, there is...
- Choose the particular over the general
- One plus one equals one-half: choose the strongest image and use it, don't inundate the reader with every image you can think of
- Speed up the pace
- Short images with no modifiers are stronger: "old man in aspic" better than "old man in aspic, quiet and white"

Revision

- First drafts are always flawed, get over it
- Triage: Revise in order of importance, rather than beginning to end, starting with:
- Characters
 - Are they interesting? Particular?
 - Would you mind spending lots of time with the protagonist? Are they flawed in some way?
 - Is the antagonist both truly evil and yet charming?
- Scenes
 - Which is the strongest scene? The weakest? What does the former have that the latter lacks?
 - Cut the weakest scene, adding any irreplaceable information to another scene. Now which is the weakest? Repeat.
- Motivation
 - What are the story's three most important actions? Are they credible? Have they been provoked by circumstance or planted some reasonable time prior to the action? Would you believe them if someone told you the story?
 - Are secondary actions credible? Are they in character?
- First page test
 - Put the name of an author you respect on the first page, take a break, then read it. Do you want to go on to the second page? If not, improve the opening.
 - It may help to move a strong scene from elsewhere up to the front, and to particularize the characters, places, and actions.
- General revision
 - Tighten the manuscript, cut cut cut

- Vary sentence length to avoid soporific sameness.
- Eliminate as much off-stage, between scene material as possible
- Speed up the pace
- Maintain character stress, tension
- Eliminate the author's voice in favor of the characters'
- Cut adjectives, adverbs, repetition, clichés
- Root out sentimentality, imprecision
- Mark visual images and pages that lack them
- Is the dialog too perfect? Confrontational enough? Longer than three sentences without some interjection? Oblique enough? Speaks for itself rather than relying on "raging" or "shouting" descriptors?
- Would it help to bring a strong scene to the front? End on a more satisfying scene or circumstance?
- Let it rest, then read it again for its ability to totally immerse the reader; cut or revise anything that breaks the spell.