

DEVELOPING STORY IDEAS

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Second Edition

Michael Rabiger



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In fond memory of Lois Deacon, who said,
"Nothing is real until I have written about it."

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Introduction

If you like writing but get frustrated by characters who refuse to come alive, plots that fizzle, or story ideas that all feel secondhand, this book will prove exhilarating and freeing. Using minimal jargon and speaking directly to you as a colleague, its advice and many practical assignments will help you generate a fund of your own story ideas—and have great pleasure doing it. Though addressed to prospective screenwriters, the book’s work is foundational and can lead just as easily to projects in prose fiction, theater, radio, or journalism.

The story development work all takes place in outline form, so critique and further work really bear fruit, for this is a workout manual in *ideation*—that is, in finding and developing the core ideas and the personal connections that underpin all good stories and lend them impact.

A book like this is necessary because telling stories—so natural and easy for the very young—gets more difficult as we grow up. We become self-conscious and self-critical. Academic education compounds the problem by herding us into large, competitive, and impersonal institutions. Most schooling concentrates on facts, objectivity, and rote memorization, and this makes self-exploration seem indulgent and irrelevant. But we come into possession of ourselves only if we connect—emotionally, imaginatively, and spiritually—with others. Humans have always done this through telling and listening to stories. Stories are the oxygen of civilization and the elixir of sanity and wisdom; we must both hear them and tell them if we are to survive and prosper.

My half-century of professional involvement with storytelling and storytellers has convinced me that each person is deeply marked by key experiences, and so each has moving stories to tell. Doing this well means first looking inward. In order to develop your creativity and individual “voice” you will need to access, value, and build upon what you carry within. This

book is about the midwifery that makes this happen. All the conceptual tools and assignments are simply explained through everyday analogies and a minimum of jargon. You will also learn something of a storyteller's capacity for acting and showmanship, for a successful screen author must be able to change roles at will from subjective to objective, from "pitching" ideas to listening or reacting as an audience member, critic, or analyst. There is curiously little in print as guidance through these vital parts of the writer's creative process.

Most people learn best through *making* something, so there are more than 50 hands-on assignments to get you working with observation, imagery, memory, and other resources. We begin with some fascinating self-assessment assignments. These help you draw a self-profile and decide provisionally what you alone have to say. Other assignments show how to exploit a great range of observational, pictorial, and written resources. You will use observations from immediate life to play a hilarious game of improvisation that exercises your intuition and helps strengthen your confidence. There are childhood and family-based assignments, others that involve oral or traditional story sources and others still that involve dreams. You will also practice adapting short stories and reality-based stories, and the final challenges are assignments using fiction and documentary. The assignments increase in length and complexity and call for you to control differing points of view.

The assignments integrate practice, theory, and discussion and ask you to use your "unfinished business"—meaning the sublimated personal agenda that we are apt to pursue only at an unconscious level. Through hands-on work, an emphasis on self-actualization, and through working (if possible) in a learning community, you can expect to develop a significant body of work and form the kind of partnerships that make creating anything in the arts so gratifying and life enhancing.

With each creative assignment comes a sampling of student work. From my discussions you see how one employs the concepts, attitudes, and respectful language of critical response, and how dramatic principles explained earlier emerge in context. Where it is useful, each chapter ends with a select bibliography headed "Going Farther."

In its final chapters the book demonstrates story editing, how to use the dramatic conventions to strengthen your work, and how to set about expanding an outline into a full-length work of fiction or nonfiction. Examples and guidelines help you turn your favorite outlines into a short story, novel, stage play, or cinema screenplay.

This new edition contains important additional material. Chapters 7–10 lay out a "tool kit" of concepts that you can use to assess any part of any story in any medium. Included are methods to:

- Handle the different roles you play while taking part in developing a story; that is, when you are by turns an author, story editor, presenter, audience member, or critic.

- Develop a character and understand the difference between stereotypes and archetypes, as well as between “flat” and “round” characters.
- Discriminate between the component parts of a scene.
- Break a complex work into a functional, three-act structure.
- Assess and graph a scene or a complete work and represent its varying intensity as a dramatic arc.
- Analyze any story in any form for its effectiveness, meaning, and purpose.
- Decide how to handle a story’s point(s) of view most effectively.

Chapter 15 contains a new feature that many people will find invaluable—a comprehensive strategy for breaking down a literary work, analyzing its contents, and evaluating it for adaptation to the screen. Many good people contributed to this book. I am indebted to the New York University Film Department faculty for their discussions and friendship, in particular Lora Hays, George Stoney, Ken Dancyger, Marketa Kimbrell, and Nick Tanis. I must also thank Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, who kindly invited me to NYU in the first place for a wonderful year of teaching.

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My toughest critic is my wife, Nancy Mattei. I offer her my heartfelt appreciation for her contributions to my work and for putting up so gracefully with a writer’s antisocial work habits.

Michael Rabiger
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