DEFINITION OF BASIC WRITING TERMS AND CHECKLIST OF COMMON ERRORS

Section 1: The Story

BASIC STORY TERMS

PLOT/THEME
The plot is the storyline or sequence of events in your novel. The "hook" is the inciting event that kicks off the plot and grabs the reader's attention. Typically, the main character or protagonist faces a life-changing event. Obstacles frustrate the protagonist's struggle to solve the problem, thus propelling the story forward. A traditional analysis is that the story arcs: it builds up to peak or climax and then falls down to a resolution.

BUILDING TO A CLIMAX
The author keeps raising the stakes by frustrating the protagonist. Inner and outer conflicts drive the protagonist to achieve the desired goal.

TENSION
Conflict is a key element. Readers love conflict, which often arises from interaction between the protagonist (hero) and the antagonist (villain), who have opposing goals. Scenes dramatize the verbal and physical fights that arise from conflicting desires.

RESOLUTION
Closing all circles introduced within the story makes for a more satisfying read. If there are unanswered questions, the reader will not remember your story, or worse, they will remember they hated it.

NOTE: Authors of books and blogs about creative writing repeatedly mention the "Common Problems" discussed in this handout. Use these checklists as guidelines to improve your rewrites, not as rules to stifle creativity.

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH PLOT DEVELOPMENT

- The hook fails to draw in the reader
- The hook is not woven into the text that follows
- The "overexcited hook"—the hyper tone of the hook doesn't match the following test
- The protagonist is not involved in gripping conflict
- The characters lack internal struggles
- The slightness of the plot doesn't grab the reader—no one's life is changed
- Too much backstory, especially at the start, slows the pace
- Dreams/flashbacks don't advance the plot
- The story doesn't start with the first important event
- The midsection doesn't keep up the pace; middle chapters "sag"
- Misleading clues (inept red herring without follow-up) don't advance the plot
- The plot doesn't prepare the reader for the resolution
- A deus ex machina—an outside force or power that saves a hopeless situation—strains believability
- The protagonist does not resolve problem by his/her own actions
- The resolution is way too complicated
- Irrelevant details slow the pace—traveling to scene where something happens, every detail of daily life, every meal
- Repetitive scenes slow the momentum
- Rather than dramatized scenes, the author uses excessive exposition (telling versus showing)

Section 2: The People in the Story

CHARACTERS
As seen through dialogue, exposition, and action, you must create believable characters
who experience emotions your readers share. Your protagonist will grow (arc) in
response to conflict, usually provided by an antagonist. This is the address for an
excellent web site which details 16 villains/antagonist archetypes:
http://tamicowden.com/villains.htm

NAMING YOUR CHARACTES:
Keep in mind your character's time period, nationality, and social class when deciding on
names. Here is the web address to find the meanings of names:
http://www.behindthename.com/

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT
Write a biography of each character who is important to the plot. Create a background
that would answer the questions of a detailed job application, plus some questions that
aren't allowed, such as religion, politics, and sexual preferences. To find the character's
voice, you might try writing a journal entry, a letter, or an email from the character's
point of view.

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH CHARACTERIZATION/NAMING
- Generic descriptions don't create precise images (medium height, medium brown hair)
- Overly long descriptions have too many details to register with the reader
- The character is described using clichéd devices such as mirrors or photos
- Comparisons to celebrities don't individualize the character
- The description fails to convey anything about the character's personality
- The characters have no conflicts or frustrations
- Personalities are one dimensional, either all good or all bad
- The character acts only as a sounding board for an ideological agenda
- A cute pet fails to create empathy for an otherwise flat or unlikeable character
- Secondary characters don't have any purpose or importance to the plot
- Gender and racial stereotypes dominate a character's portrayal
- The antagonist lacks adequate motivation to thwart the main character
- The antagonist's excessively complex evil schemes confuse the reader and make the plot sag
- One good trait fails to redeem an otherwise repulsive bad guy (He loved his mother!)
- Names look and/or sound alike, confusing the reader
- Names are not appropriate to the time period or the character's background

Section 3: The Time and Place of the Story

SETTING
Setting means the environment where your characters live out their story. It includes the time, location, and society for your plot. Setting grounds the reader in each scene before the suspense begins. As you are writing, experience the journey along with your characters—this way you will "see" what should be introduced as you write. Don't forget to use the other senses, including smell (the strongest memory center).

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS
Selecting a certain type of setting may define the whole character of your novel: alternate histories, fantasy worlds (from post-apocalyptic to medieval fairy tales), westerns, and utopias. In any novel, the setting may be similar to a character, because it propels or even determines the action. For example, consider the difference to the story if it is set on a Somolian pirate ship as opposed to a middle class Victorian drawing room.

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH SETTING
- At the start of a scene, the characters are not anchored in a setting
- As a scene progresses, the characters don't interact with the setting
- An overly detailed setting obscures the action
- The setting doesn't define or influence character
- Setting descriptions fail to evoke mood or atmosphere
- Descriptions of food and journeys don't advance plot or enhance characterization
- Lack of sensory appeal makes setting description flat
- Setting too conveniently reflects the characters' moods or situations ("It rained when she started to cry.")

Section 4: The Perspective of the Story

POINT OF VIEW
Authors present stories from different perspectives or points of view (POV).

In first person, the author uses the pronoun "I" to restrict the outlook to one character who directly tells the story to the reader. The narrator's participation in the story ranges from the protagonist who propels the plot to an observer who reports the events.

In third person, the author uses the pronouns "he" or "she" to present the novel's events. Most common is limited third person, which means that the author restricts the narration to one character's viewpoint. Omniscient third person storytelling allows the author to be inside all the character's heads; the author sometimes addresses the reader directly.

COMMON POV ERRORS

- The narrative perspective is not a good fit for the story (a first person narrator may give a claustrophobic tone)
- The POV character is not the most compelling one to tell the story (this character may not be emotionally invested in important scenes)
- Authorial intrusions pull the reader out of the story
- An inconsistent POV (switch from first to third person randomly) confuses the story
- Head jumping (arbitrary shifting within the third person POV)
- Facts, observations, and insights are outside of POV character's knowledge and experience range
- The POV character lacks a distinct voice

Section 5: What the Characters Say

DIALOGUE
Dialogue allows characters to speak directly to us. Readers rarely skip dialogue. "White space" (the clean areas of the page) makes for a faster read. Powerful, realistic dialogue will further the plot and can also be an important tool in character development. After writing a scene with dialogue, ask yourself what it will add to understanding the characters, establishing conflict and propelling the plot, or creating atmosphere.

Tags are words or phrases that tell the reader who is speaking (attributions).

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH DIALOGUE

- Stiff and formal talk sounds unnatural
- Empty babble does not develop character or move the plot forward
- Annoying nervous ticks or speech patterns ("Okay," "Um") serve no purpose
- All the characters sound the same
- Long speeches are not broken up with action or responses
- The dialogue attribution too often combines "said" with an overworked adverb
- Dialogue exchanges lack enough attributions, making it hard for the reader to know who is talking
- The dialogue serves as an information dump ("As you know, Bob," "Can you explain, Professor?")
- Dialect or foreign accent is overused
- Talking heads—pages of dialogue are not broken up with references to setting or action

Section 6: How You Tell the Story

STYLE
Style is the way you write about your characters and their actions.

On an aesthetic level, it involves word choice, syntax, tone, and figures of speech such as similes and metaphors.

On a more technical level, it relates to grammatical usage or "rules."

COMMON STYLE PROBLEMS

- Overuse of adverbs and adjectives
- Weak verb choice-- using passive verbs and "to be" verbs instead of action verbs in the active voice
- Monotonous sentence and paragraph length
- Imprecise word choice
- Overuse of "that"
- Clichéd phrases—do you see your similes and metaphors frequently in newspaper and magazine articles?
- Redundancies and clichéd oxymorons—see list at http://www.jpschoemer.com/Repsoxys.html

COMMON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

- It's/its
- Their/there/they're
- Too/to/two
- Who/whom
- Loose/lose
- Choose/chose
- Affect/effect
- Lie/lay
- Fewer/less
- Principal/principle
- Misuse of which and that
- Misuse of hyphen
- Misuse of apostrophe
- Incorrect parallelism
- Dangling modifiers ("Shaking her fist, the door opened.")
- Ambiguous pronoun reference
- Inconsistent verb tenses
- Subject verb agreement

SAMPLE OF BAD WRITING

It made her mad that the vampire got himself killed right then and there.

She had been introduced to him at the going-away happy hour party for Jim. He was a tall man with white skin and dark black hair. He wore all black clothes, which wasn't too strange because black is considered to be very fashionable. His eyes were dark pits. Its not that Esmeralda had a thing about vampires. She could have told John that he should not have been so careful of using any words that would offend in his desire to be politically correct and not antagonize anyone in his introduction of Calvin the vampire as being "life challenged".

The party was noisy so Cal and Esme had to shout to hear each other. She liked Calvin because he had good polite manners. He never thought of questioning her as to why she wore faded blue jeans and a wrinkled white T-shirt to a rather important cocktail party in a somewhat fancy restaurant lounge!

"What's your connection to James?" She burbled brightly in her high-pitched piercing voice.

"I used to be Jimmy's neighbor when he lived in the condo over the gallery."

Calvin had a piercing stare that went right though her.

"Now he lives in the suburbs."

"Too ghastly for words."

"I think the suburbs are okay if you have kids."

Esmeralda snatched a succulent luscious oyster appetizer from a tall handsome dark-haired waiter who smiled at her with flashing gleaming white teeth.

CRITIQUE OF SAMPLE

It made her mad that the vampire got himself killed right then and there. [use active verbs; "it" has no noun as a reference; setting not anchored; hook not followed up]

She had been introduced to him at the going-away happy hour party for Jim. [passive voice; no setting anchor; confusing pronoun reference; is Jim an important character who advances plot or characterization?] He was a tall man with white skin and dark black hair. [who is the "he" referred to?; use strong verbs, not "was"; description too general; overdone adjectives] He wore all black clothes, which wasn't too strange because black is considered to be very fashionable.[repeat black; clothes description doesn't enhance reader's understanding of vampire's personality; POV—is this Esmeralda or the author] His eyes were dark pits. [cliché; use strong verbs] Its not that Esmeralda had a thing about vampires. ["its" should be it's; pronoun reference vague; diction vague] She could have told John that he should not have been so careful of using any words that would offend in his desire to be politically correct and not antagonize anyone in his introduction of Calvin the vampire as being "life challenged". [wordy; use strong verbs; incorrect placement of period after quote]

The party was noisy so Cal and Esme had to shout to hear each other. [vague description; no setting anchor; names—be consistent] She liked Calvin because he had

good polite manners. [adjective overload; where's the conflict?] He never thought of questioning her as to why she wore faded blue jeans and a wrinkled white T-shirt to a rather important cocktail party in a somewhat fancy restaurant lounge! [POV shift from Esmeralda to "he"; overload of adjectives; overdo exclamation point]

"What's your connection to James?" She burbled brightly in her high-pitched piercing voice. [boring; silly dialogue tag; overuse adverb and adjective]

"I used to be Jimmy's neighbor when he lived in the condo over the gallery." [need some conflict; does this detail advance plot or characterization?]

Calvin had a piercing stare that went right though her. [cliché]

"Now he lives in the suburbs."

"Too ghastly for words."

"I think the suburbs are okay if you have kids." [need dialogue tags for clarity and to ground scene; no conflict yet]

Esmeralda snatched a succulent luscious oyster appetizer from a tall handsome dark-haired waiter who smiled at her with flashing gleaming white teeth. [adjective overload; who cares about the waiter?]

REWRITE OF SAMPLE

[Note: the author has chosen to delete the backstory and write a completely new scene. The writing still needs a good editor. When you need a writing workout, revise this passage to sharpen its impact.]

Out on the street in front of her house, Esmerelda heard a screech of brakes and a popping sound. A car gunned its engine and took off. She watched in horror as the vampire Calvin turned from the open window, blood spurting from a hole in his chest. He collapsed on the floor with a heavy thump, stretched out flat on his back with his sightless eyes gazing up to the ceiling.

She rushed to the window and peeked cautiously out. She couldn't see the car. None of her neighbors had rushed out of their houses. Maybe they didn't pay attention to the popping sound. Maybe they were all at work. She had problems of her own. She had to get rid of the vampire's body. It wouldn't do for the mayor's wife to have to explain what a dead vampire was doing in her living room.

Esmerelda nudged the corpse with the toe of her red high-heeled shoes, hoping that the legend that dead vampires turn to ash was true. Nothing happened. It was up to her to dispose of the corpse. Grabbing his ankles, she lugged the remains into the bathroom, where she laboriously got him into the tub. Running into the garage, the paint thinner would supply her a way to ignite the corpse.

WRITING SAMPLE FOR PARTICIPANTS TO REVISE

Here's your assignment: Your cozy mystery has just been rejected by the thirty-sixth agent. You decide to take another look at the opening paragraphs. Do a quick rewrite for a more effective scene. Feel free to invent background and character descriptions.

Ellen got tripped by a very large crack that made the sidewalk not very safe. Ellen fell in a way that made her land with her hands pushed out. Ellen wore shoes that made it dangerous for her to walk anywhere that required care and precision. She got herself to her feet as quickly as lightning.

"Can I help you?"

The man who offered help was tall and handsome with light blond hair and flashing blue eyes. For a man, he had on an incredibly well put-together outfit, everything matched in a way that made Ellen envy him. He had a humorous mouth and sparkling teeth.

"You!" She said angrily and glaring at him with her very dark almost black eyes. Limping away, her disdain was apparent. She called over her shoulder, "After what you just said to me, don't think I won't keep it in mind."

READING ABOUT WRITING

The First Five Pages, Noah Lukeman
On Writing, Stephen King
The Writer's Journey, Christopher Vogler
Writing Down the Bones, Natale Goldberg
Bird by Bird, Anne Lamont
Don't Murder Your Own Mystery, Chris Roerden
How to Write a Damn Good Mystery, James Frey
Zen in the Art of Writing, Ray Bradbury
Elements of Style, William Strunk and E.B. White