INDIE**LAB**

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BY MATTY DALRYMPLE

Creating Your Story Frame

One of my favorite nautical terms is "brightwork." When I first encountered this word, I assumed it meant the polished metalwork on boats, but I learned it also refers to highly varnished woodwork. Search for *Chris-Craft vintage runabout* and you'll find some stunning examples of wooden brightwork.

I love the concept of brightwork because, like so many nautical concepts, it has a perfect analogy in the writing world. In the same way boatbuilders layer and polish the pieces of wood that make up the brightwork, we writers layer and polish description and dialogue to add depth and luster to our work. Just as a boat's brightwork draws the eye of a discerning sailor, well-crafted description and dialogue draw our readers into our story. Perhaps it's what draws us, the stories' creators, in as well.

But no boatbuilder embarks on the painstaking process of installing wooden brightwork before the frame of the boat is in place. As writers, we should ensure the frame of our story is in place before focusing on our "prose brightwork."

If only I had followed this commonsense advice.

I love crafting description and dialogue, and it's easy for that detail to draw me in before I have the overarching story clear in my mind. That siren call is especially hard to resist when the scene plays out like a movie in my mind. I can visualize every detail of the setting, sense every nuance of my characters' emotional states, and hear every line of dialogue they will use to express those states.

For example, in an early draft of my fifth Ann Kinnear Suspense Novel, I allocated several thousand words to a fully fleshed-out scene of Ann traveling to Pittsburgh for an engagement for her spirit-sensing business. I even considered taking a road trip to Pittsburgh to inform my depiction of the neighborhood. I was immersed in capturing these details ... until I surfaced from my work and realized there was no rib in the frame of my story to which to attach this description and dialogue.

I faced one of the writer's most painful choices. I could force the ill-fitting story "plank" into place and hope that the reader didn't notice the resulting leaks. Or I could cut it out and let my story, once established, dictate the details that would serve its overall purpose. (I chose the second.)

That dilemma hurts enough when it plays out at a scene level. It's worse when it plays out at the story level.

I finished the 80,000-word first draft of the novel, stepped back to admire my hard-won words, and realized that the story had several significant breaches. That Pittsburgh scene was too thematically and geographically removed from the rest of the story to fit snugly. The villain didn't have enough page time to give readers a fair shot at guessing "whodunit." Storyline inconsistencies violated the smooth presentation of who-knows-what-when—an especially egregious faux pas in a mystery.

Every adjustment I made to one plank of my story displaced another. The breaches became worse, and the story wallowed. I made pass after pass through the manuscript, trying to patch the holes, only to find that I had introduced a whole new set of inconsistencies. I discarded and rewrote more words with that manuscript than I had with any other book.

A plan to launch that novel six months after the previous installment of the series stretched to eight months, then 10, then 12.

Fans became impatient, and I feared I might lose their interest. I knew I was losing income from sales. A manuscript that should have been complete after one editorial review required the time and expense of a second.

I did eventually address all the issues, but the effort was exhausting. I vowed I would not allow myself to get mired in that dilemma again.

When I started work on the next Ann Kinnear novel, I considered creating a highly structured outline, complete with Roman numerals and indents. But that felt constraining, like securing a boat with too-short lines: a change in tide might leave you literally high and dry, dangling precariously above mucky ground. I didn't want to impose limitations on my story. I wanted to create a firm foundation. I realized that what I needed was a sturdy story frame.

After some experimentation, I came up with these guidelines for constructing a frame:

- Use a different (sans serif) font to help establish a framing mindset that is distinct from the mindset you will bring to the creation of your "prose brightwork."
- Begin each scene with the POV character's name, emphasized with caps, to ensure consistency of perspective.
- Describe the action using present tense to keep the focus on that story "rib," not the embellishments.
- Capture the scenes in chronological order to ensure plotline logic (e.g., a flashback scene that will occur in the denouement of the final manuscript might be the first scene in the frame).

- Include notes about the reasons for specific aspects of the scene to avoid making a change without understanding its ripple effect.

For example:

ANN and Mike agree to meet with Dirk, who lives in nearby Wilmington, Delaware, to discuss Dirk's invitation for Ann to speak at a writers' conference. The weather is sunny and dry (to explain why Dirk would drive his classic car to the meeting). From their seats by the window, they see Dirk pull into the parking lot. Mike is entranced with the car (setting up the later trade of Dirk's car for Ann's services).

My first framing pass, about 5,000 words, revealed a plot hole early in the story. I made a second pass, fixing the hole and solidifying my frame as I went. At 10,000 words, I saw where I could tighten the plot by eliminating a point-of-view character and by elevating a minor character to a major role. Subsequent passes highlighted opportunities to consolidate settings, to change a character's profession to better support the plot, even to change the nature of the crime and the identity of the villain. (One way that the writer's frame is conveniently unlike the boatbuilder's is that we can easily adjust it as we discover opportunities for improvement.)

In fact, the relative ease of these adjustments enabled me to bring a sense of adventure and playfulness to the framing process. I would have been loath to change the identity of my novel's villain if I had discovered a better alternative only after having drafted the full story. By discovering

it while constructing a frame of only a few thousand words, I could see it as a welcome opportunity, not an odious necessity. Far from constraining my creativity, the frame spurred it.

When I had a frame of 20,000 words, I found that the modifications I was making on each pass were now refinements, not wholesale changes. With each pass, I added more description and dialogue brightwork, now firmly anchored to the ribs of my story frame. I knew I could accommodate further mid-course adjustments without causing the overall story to founder. In fact, my frame morphed seamlessly into the manuscript. The only marker that I had transitioned fully out of the framing stage was when I switched my tense from present to past and my font from sans serif to serif.

By gaining an understanding of the overall story frame before I focused on description and dialogue, I avoided the frustration of creative thrash and the pain of discarded words. A smoother, faster creation process meant a more efficient and profitable publishing effort. Most importantly, I could launch my readers into a story that offered the pleasure of highly polished prose brightwork based on a carefully constructed frame that would carry them successfully through their imaginative journey. **WD**

Matty Dalrymple is the author of the Lizzy Ballard Thrillers and the Ann Kinnear Suspense Novels and Suspense Shorts. Matty explores the writing craft and the publishing voyage via "The Indy Author Podcast" and her books *The Indy Author's Guide to Podcasting for Authors* and *Taking the Short Tack: Creating Income and Connecting with Readers Using Short Fiction.*

Story Frame

1. What is the overarching story in your current project?

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2. Are there any scenes that don't directly fit into this overarching story? List them here.

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3. Can you easily remove these scenes without disrupting the overarching story?

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4. What does the story lose by excluding these scenes?

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5. What does it gain?

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6. Does it leave any potential plot holes you'll need to deal with?

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7. How long will it take you to revise the manuscript to exclude these scenes? Write as many details as you can (including deadlines).

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