

The Secrets of Stylish Narrative



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(A4 version) by Mike Bourke

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Chapter 1: Polished Loquacity

What's the real difference between game prep and a lack of game prep?

I think the most overt differences can all be summarized as felicity of style: better-presented maps and illustrations, better thought-out plans, better characterization of NPCs, better depiction of that characterization, and more stylish Narrative.

Better-presented maps & illustrations

Although this e-book is going to focus on the last of the differences, I thought it worth at least synthesizing the others. While you can get by with quick-and-dirty hand-drawn maps and sketches, investing some prep time makes it more certain that nothing important gets left out, and enables Google image searches for photos that help place your players mentally within their surroundings.

Better thought-out plans

Clever NPCs require better plans. You can argue that prep-time should be proportionate to the quality of the NPCs being encountered in the game. Not saying I agree with going that far, but there is an argument to be made in support of such a position. It's a sure bet that some NPCs will supposedly be smarter than the GM, and the only way to simulate that is either to fake it or to do some of the NPCs thinking in advance, preparing plans, contingencies, and alternatives. Just because a scheme or response is off-the-cuff from an in-game perspective, it does not mean that it has to be so in the real world.

And then there is the case for characters who are simpler than the GM. That generally means having simpler goals - but that requires the character to have simpler priorities that derive directly from their personalities and ambitions. Which brings me to the next point:

Better Characterized NPCs

When people improvise, they usually employ one of a small selection of stock personas, perhaps modified to accommodate different ambitions or priorities. These are quick and easy and very cardboard in texture. There's all sorts of advice and tools for creating more individual personalities that are available, and many more that can be adapted from traditional writer's guides and the like. But they all take time and a little thought, and not every approach will suit every character. Prep time creates personalities.

Prep time also permits the GM to find or create effective ways of expressing those personalities through everything from costume to speech patterns to photographic or artistic expressions (including a little theme music, if your style accommodates it). The better your NPCs present themselves, the more the players can relate to them as they would "real people", producing a better, more immersive, and more realistic game. Further, the more successful the NPCs are at stealing scenes by being more "real" than the PCs, the more it challenges the players to lift their own games, in effect laying off some of the burden of creating a better game onto their shoulders. Many hands make light work, as the old-time homily goes.

And still another benefit of game prep is that canned dialogue can be prepared and polished to better express the personality of the character. Don't just tell the players that the NPC is nervous, find ways to reflect nerves and edginess in your performance as the NPC at the game table.

Finally, within this category, dialogue can be a tool for the NPC to achieve their goals, to show what they care about and how deeply they care, and to show what they know and can speak about with conviction and sincerity. This isn't easy to fake, you need to be able to get inside the NPCs heads - and that often means reading up on a subject and on real people with similar beliefs. It can mean watching YouTube videos of such people, or documentaries. It means game prep.

More stylish narrative

And finally, it means more stylish narrative. Great narrative, when describing people, places, and events means creating concise, communicative, and flavorful words to create a whole greater than the sum of their parts while being more easily assimilated as a result of their brevity. They enable the narrative to flow naturally instead of being disjointed and fragmented.

Writers of the highest standard strip their narrative back to the barest essentials to make room for characterization and then polish the result until it gleams. They search for ways to convey dry narrative into dialogue, giving the characters something to talk about. They may draw up checklists of things they want a stretch of dialogue to convey and agonize over each and every word.

Great writing imparts setting information through description of scenes, and people and sounds perfectly natural in doing so. It imparts characterization through dialogue and behavior. It imparts a sense of time through dynamics. It builds a tone and a mood through choice of words employed, and ensures that no word is used that contradicts that tone and mood save when explicitly necessary for contrast. And it does all this while telling a story with emotional buildup and release. These are skills that no writer ever feels they have completely mastered; they never say that narrative and dialogue are perfect, they simply accept that the result is the best they are now capable of achieving with their current standard of expertise and within the constraints that have been imposed by deadlines, financial status, and editorial/publisher's guidelines.

Well, you don't have to make your narrative Great Writing. But you should aim for a "good" to "excellent" standard. And that takes time.

What this e-book is *not* about

There are lots of articles and good advice out there on making efficient use of your prep time, on scheduling and prioritization and squeezing 150% out of every available second. I've written what I hope is some of it (a [Google search](#) within the Campaign Mastery site finds 190 articles that refer to "efficient" and "prep", some redundant. Perhaps more usefully, a [search using the site's own search box](#) selects those articles and presents them in four pages, ten or twelve articles to a page).

This article is not about efficiency of prep, it's about effective use of prep in one particular field within the skillset of preparing adventures. It assumes that you can spend as much time as it takes, however unrealistic that assumption may be. However, efficiency is always a consideration and the technique eliminates as much wasted time as possible.

What is Narrative?

Bullet points break a narrative into bite-sized chunks. They are a great way to organize your material into smaller tasks. Here, for example, is a rough breakdown of a novel:

- ◆ Synopsis of the story
 - ◆ Breakdown of the synopsis into chapters
 - ◆ Breakdown of each chapter into sections
 - ◆ Breakdown of each section into scenes
 - ◆ Breakdown of each scene into location/context passages, dialogue passages, and/or action passages

Location/Context passages are collectively considered *Narrative*. Some people might also include Action passages, and certainly within any context other than an RPG, they would fall within that category. This is because they are all described from some omniscient perspective (in the visual sense), even if the actual writing is from a first-person perspective (in the literary sense). The writer is communicating directly with the reader.

- ◆ **Context Passages** - are either equivalent to a voice-over establishing the context of the action or dialogue that is about to take place, providing historical narrative or synopsisizing events that have taken place between chapters, or describing/identifying the participants in an action or dialogue passage that's to follow. They place the action or dialogue that is to follow into context, attaching meaning and significance; hence the name.
- ◆ **Location Passages** - describe the environment within which action or dialogue will take place.
- ◆ **Action Passages** - describe a series of events taking place within a location as a result of the context.

These are all different to some degree when applied to an RPG.

- ◆ **Context Passages** - now include information for the GM to use in adjudicating roleplay and player choices, as well as making the players aware of anything they need to know in order to make those choices. This includes describing any NPCs. They still exist to place the action or dialogue that is to follow into context, attaching meaning and significance.
- ◆ **Location Passages** - describe the environment within which action or dialogue will take place. Again, this is essential information for the players to make appropriate choices for their characters.
- ◆ **Action Passages** - These detail the game mechanics of the situation and may include prompts for mandatory tests for environmental consequences. Most action is implied rather than being explicitly described; for example "**Chest, locked, DC 22, contains...**" implies the requirement for lock-picking or physical intervention, and is never required (beyond use as superficial description) if the players choose not to investigate the contents of the chest. If we assume that such descriptive elements are extracted into a context or location passage, Action sequences will no longer count as narrative because in an RPG they are *interactive* instead.

The Bullet-point Description

One of the big advantages of nested bullet points with appropriate highlighting of key terms is that they enable the GM to locate the relevant passages that convey the information necessary to interpret whatever is occurring as they needed - assuming they are concise enough. Sometimes they are used simply to index more detailed sections of text.

In a novel, passages are presented in a completely linear fashion - passage B follows passage A, and are always read in succession. You don't read one paragraph, then skip to a later paragraph, then to another, and then go back to the paragraph that follows the first,

In an RPG, passages are explicitly non-linear, and the determination of which passage is relevant is the result of interpreting choices made by one or more of the participants (including the GM if the passage deals with a reaction to the PCs). In order to find what they are looking for, passages need to be organized in a relatively-rigid structural manner.

Bullet-point descriptions and numbered lists are the perfect ways of organizing such material. While these text arrangements would be highly unusual within a novel, except when being quoted verbatim, they - or analogous approaches - are very common in RPG adventures.

Law-firm example

For example, here's a description of a Law Firm that might appear in an RPG:

- ◆ A central **elevator** opens to main reception.
- ◆ **Corridors** are in a H pattern, broad enough for secretarial stations to line each side.
- ◆ A central **reception area** with company logo in Gold against splashes of red, white, and blue on frosted glass.
- ◆ Luxurious soft **carpets**, custom-designed & fitted.
- ◆ The **walls** are polished wood panels. Walls are never empty, each has something - usually a **portrait** or photograph of a past or current partner. Some date back to the firm's founding in 1863. They are all exactly the same size and hung at the same height in identical frames.
- ◆ The **ceiling** is vaulted and molded with paint used to suggest greater depth (it has darker tones in the center). Lighting is from tasteful brass cylindrical **chandeliers** with a slightly-modern design which illuminate the offices clearly but leave the ceiling in shadow. Almost-invisible apertures in the moldings conceal security cameras with at least two observing every point in the office.
- ◆ Light switches, etc, are all concealed behind **plants** of various kinds in polished **marble pots**. Each has a small spotlight which also illuminates a label identifying the plant and certifying that it is pollen-free. All plants are in perfect health.
- ◆ Private **waiting rooms** so a client can't see any other client.
- ◆ Each partner has at least one **secretary's desk** next to the waiting room allocated to that partner and oriented at right angles to the central corridor, facing the partner's waiting room. Each secretary has a polished wood desk with a glass panel embossed on the underside showing the company logo. Each desk has a nameplate, a computer terminal, a keyboard, and a pen holder. **Filing cabinets** are located beside each desk, also made of polished wood to blend in. They are all inset into the walls.
- ◆ All secretaries have custom-built and upholstered ergonomic **chairs** with plush blue velvet linings. Other chairs are constructed of leather and must be changed regularly because they all have that distinctive "**new leather**" **smell**.
- ◆ Brass nameplates on the polished wooden **doors** in enameled black letters are beyond each secretarial station.
- ◆ At regular intervals between the secretarial stations, **water fountains** in small alcoves of polished wood dispense drinkable water chilled to exactly 4 degrees centigrade. Each water fountain is backed by a small **water feature**.
- ◆ One side-wall of the H is given over to a huge **fish-tank** full of large tropical fish. Lights are strategically located inside the tank to illuminate the fish.
- ◆ Running along the corridor that runs alongside the fish-tank are four large **conference rooms**. Beyond these rooms at the bottom of the H are doors to the **typing pool** and **switchboard**. Between these two areas is a staff dining room which can be reached directly by means of an almost-invisible corridor running up from the bar of the H which has no other purpose. On the far side of the central reception area, an identical corridor running in the opposite direction leads to a Partner's Dining Room. Each Dining room has a small kitchen attached. These are relatively unused and the equipment is at least 10 years out of date.
- ◆ Doorways at the top of the H lead to a large **law library**.
- ◆ No **windows** are visible save one that fills the wall opposite the fish-tank. On closer inspection, that "window" is actually an electronically-controlled series of 40-feet-wide panoramic photographs capturing the city skyline at four points in time - midday, sunset, sunrise, and at night - as they would be seen from the point of view of the window. These photographs have been printed on a belt and are automatically rotated to synchronism with the outside world.

This description is great for supplying details of various elements of the law firm's offices. There could be still more details - what color are the carpets? How many partners are there? Where are the Associates, who do the legal grunt work, located?

Unfortunately it's lousy in a couple of other ways, too, like failing to give a general impression of the place before the PCs focus on the details.

You could simply read the whole thing out, but that brings another problem - retention of details. Quick, without looking, when was the law firm established? / can remember because I just wrote it (and changed the date about three times before settling on my final choice) but a week from now? I wouldn't put long odds on it. You've just read it, which is better than having it read to you (according to neurological studies), but not by much - I'd be surprised if one in ten could answer the question.

You could draw a set of blueprints from the description, and even do a sketch or two of the place. But this will certainly never work in a narrative sense.

The Structural Problem

Some of the problems with this approach are inherent to the bullet-point approach, which lumps everything together in one place for the GM to work out for themselves. In other words, they are structural in nature, and exist because this list is trying to do it all at once. Before you could create any alternative, you need to know how to correct the structural problem.

A good narrative description should convey a general impression and provide cues for the players. In conjunction with a quick map, it should tell the players enough to know what areas they want to examine more closely - and, if they aren't there to steal something, or investigate something, most of the details aren't needed right now.

If, for example, the characters were there to meet one of the lawyers, here's the order things should happen in:

- ◆ General Narrative introduction (overall impression)
- ◆ Details of the central reception area
- ◆ Encounter with the receptionist(s), who escorts PCs to the secretarial station of the lawyer they are to meet
- ◆ Narrative description of overall layout
- ◆ Narrative description of secretarial station
- ◆ Encounter with the secretary, who takes PCs to the waiting room assigned to the lawyer they are to meet
- ◆ Time to look around *from the waiting room*
- ◆ Encounter with the secretary, who takes PCs to the lawyer's office or perhaps to one of the meeting rooms
- ◆ Narrative description of the office or meeting room. Did anyone notice that there were no details of either in the list above?
- ◆ Encounter with the lawyer.

In other words, the long list makes a great planning resource, but it's not at all useful for the intended purpose. There are ways to convert it into a useful form, some better than others.

You could, for example, simply read aloud the parts that are relevant to each of the narrative subsections listed above, skipping the rest. But this is terribly inefficient - employing this approach means that you have to read each item on the list to yourself five times, each time choosing whether or not to then read it aloud. By the time you were finished, you would have read it at least six times *in-game* - not counting any times you read it in advance of play!

The Stylish Alternative

I'm not going to do all of the narrative passages required, but one should be illustrative.

One of the problems with needing to break this article up now manifests itself. While I have the process outlined as a series of bullet points - there's some irony there - I didn't have it fully detailed at the time of writing this section. Normally, I would have left the example until the process was detailed and then used it to generate the text, but I needed the example *now*. So this example will not be a robust demonstration of the end-product of the process, which should therefore be *much* better than this quick-and-dirty version. Just a caveat that I thought readers should be aware of before I get into the alternative form of the example.

I did a copy-and-paste of the list, then deleted everything that didn't contribute to the initial narrative passage. From that, I wrote the following:

"The elevator dings as the doors open to reveal the offices of Brash, Livercoat, Woodley, and Howe. Interns with arm-loads of law-books and harried expressions walk past with measured strides, deep in quiet conversation. Nineteenth century opulence masks modern convenience. The cream-colored soft carpets become mushroom-brown at the walls and are clearly custom-made for this office space. The walls are polished teak, oak, and maple panels decorated with portraits of partners past and present in identical gold frames. Alabaster-white molded ceilings are almost lost in the shadows above tasteful but modern cylindrical brass chandeliers, and the scent of new leather fills the air. Directly in front of you is a central reception area with the company logo in Gold set against splashes of red, white, and blue on a pane of frosted glass. The receptionist says 'Good afternoon' with a smile as she looks up."

From this point, it would be natural to let the PCs respond with an appropriate social nicety and a statement of their business. In the course of that encounter, a thumbnail description of the receptionist can be provided, or it could be given before they respond at all; either way, the narrative would flow naturally into the encounter.

The Difference

The difference between this version and the full description bullet list should be obvious. It lacks almost all the detail of the first version, but it plants the reader - or the player hearing it - definitively in the surroundings by painting a vivid overall picture of the law firm.

There is a definite narrative flow to the description - floor to walls to ceiling to lights to immediately in front, where the receptionist is located. It was important for that to come last because that logically leads to the next part of the scene, the receptionist encounter.

Everything that was not explicitly stated is either not needed (lunch rooms, law library, etc) or can be incorporated into a later narrative passage, and you know that because the narrative passages have already been defined. This enabled discrimination against the unnecessary and made room to answer a questions or two that would have otherwise arisen, like "How can we tell the carpets are custom-made?", and sprinkling with the odd additional detail that is just enough to prevent it being obvious that this description is abbreviated and general.

Finally, the description is dynamic - there are things happening, in the form of the elevator doors, the interns, and the receptionist.

Even though the two versions are equally successful in painting a picture of the setting, the narrative passage is only 145 words, compared to the 605 of the bullet list, has additional details, and is better in a number of ways - vividness, dynamism, and accessibility. And you only have to read it once *in-game*, whereas processing the bullet list effectively involved reading it time and time again.

Hierarchical Nesting Of General Statements

General Impressions persist. A general description of the entire setting applies to all subsequent areas within that setting, and a general impression of a single area persists to all descriptions of specific elements of that area - regardless of how much other narrative blocks might interrupt the descriptive totality.

Consider the following structure:

- ◆ General Impression of area
 - ◆ Description of immediately-visible areas
 - ◆ Detailed description of immediately-ahead area (Reception)
 - ◆ Dialogue Scene Trigger: Receptionist

This is a structural analysis of a typical block of narrative text, such as the one offered as an example of stylish narrative above.

If I extend the structure, bearing in mind the basic plot outline (PCs are here to meet one of the lawyers), what I mean should become clear:

◆ **General Impression of Law Offices**

◆ **SCENE 1 - RECEPTION:**

- ◆ Description of immediately-visible areas
- ◆ Detailed description of immediately-ahead area (reception)
- ◆ *Inserted Narrative Block: General Impression of Receptionist*
- ◆ Dialogue Scene Trigger: Receptionist
- ◆ *Inserted Dialogue Scene: Receptionist*
- ◆ *Inserted Narrative Block: Description of Receptionist*
- ◆ *Inserted Action/Dialogue Sequence: Receptionist summons Secretary of Lawyer*

◆ **SCENE 2 - SECRETARIAL STATION:**

- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence: Secretary Arrives at Reception*
- ◆ *Inserted Narrative Block: General description of Secretary*
- ◆ *Inserted Dialogue Scene: Receptionist introduces Secretary to PCs, Debates where meeting can be accommodated, settles on Meeting Room number 2, tells secretary to make sure Lawyer has vacated it by 4:00 PM as another partner has booked it.*
- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence: Secretary leads PCs past partner's offices with secretarial stations.*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: Description of Secretarial Stations
 - ◆ General Impression of Secretarial Stations/office layout
 - ◆ Inserted Action Sequence: Secretary pauses by desk of Secretary #2
 - ◆ Specific impression of Secretarial Station #2
 - ◆ *Inserted Narrative Block: General description of Secretary #2*
 - ◆ Inserted Dialogue Block: Secretary asks Secretary#2 to find Lawyer & tell him the PCs are here

◆ **SCENE 3 - TRANSIT TO MEETING ROOM**

- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence (cont): Secretary leads PCs past water features...*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: Description of Water Features
- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence (cont): ...past fish-tank...*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: Description of Fish-tank
- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence (cont): ...to the meeting room*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: Description of Meeting Room

Everything that derives from our location bullet-points is shown above in plain text, everything that derives from somewhere else is in *italics*. The General Impression of the law-firm persists throughout, though it may be refined or extended by subsequent descriptive blocks. The general Impression of the receptionist and the reception area persists throughout the scenes that take place there but does not continue into the next narrative block of law office descriptions.

Each piece of the law office that the PCs pass by or through presents an opportunity for additional dialogue or action sequences, which combine to give the impression of the office as an active location where people are constantly doing law-office-type things, bringing the location to life. If you don't have some sort of interaction at a location, for example the fish-tank, all you need is the general impression of it with no need to go into details.

In theory, there is no need to repeat or reinforce the general impression once it's given, because it persists throughout. Every subsequent detail does that for you. In practice, if there is an extended action sequence (especially one that modifies the general impression in some way, eg

a disgruntled client shooting up the place) or dialogue sequence (eg the meeting with the lawyer), it may be necessary to reestablish it *if there is any further significant action to take place at the law firm on this visit*.

Deciding when a general impression needs to be reestablished and how to do it is part of the artistry of writing. It depends on too many factors to be subject to hard and fast rules, or even to consistent guidelines: the intensity of the original impression, the amount of material in between, any "built-in" reinforcement from subsequent descriptive passages, to name but a few. Ideally, you want it all to be consistent and accumulate towards an overall perception of the place and people, and - as I said - that's more of an art than a matter of technique, and certainly beyond the scope of this book.

Chapter 2: A Bullet To The Point

The process of creating top-notch narrative is not quick, and the process in this e-book assumes unlimited time on tap for polishing, however unrealistic that assumption may be. However, efficiency is always a consideration and the technique eliminates as much wasted time as possible.

Even if some of the more time-consuming steps are skipped, short-cutted, or combined with other steps, you can get 90% of the result for about 10% of the time. The secret to doing so is knowing your own strengths and weaknesses, knowing the entire process, and where those strengths and weaknesses will impact on the process. You can target the areas for effort that will give you the biggest gains while skipping or skimping on those that play to your strengths. And it's always great to have an awareness of the whole process on tap to be called upon when the result really matters.

The Technique

This process is intended for writing of a novel or other piece of fiction, or part thereof, and is a compilation of many smaller processes derived from many sources that come together for that purpose. As pointed out in Chapter 1, there are a lot of parallels between narrative for fiction-writing and narrative for use in a roleplaying adventure, so this process is directly importable; it's then a case of determining where to compromise and by how much. Since every individual is different, those decisions will also be different in every case.

The exact technique that I have distilled from a great many contributing sources in combination with my own experiences consists of 56 (!) steps & processes that group naturally into eight stages. The first three stages, detailed below, deal with the production and organization of your narrative content in the form of bullet-points from which polished narrative can then be produced:

Stage 1: Preliminaries:

1. Organization & Planning
2. Placeholders
3. Use a scratch document
4. Index by placeholder
5. The retention of progress
6. Checklist
7. Breakpoint 1

Stage 2: Bullet-pointing:

8. Multitasking: Personality
9. Visualize
10. Reference
11. Polish: Sensory Cues
12. Bullet Points
13. Breakpoint 2

Stage 3: Narrative Organization:

14. Mistake #1: A sentence to each bullet point
15. Mistake #2: The Six Surfaces
16. Mistake #3: Over-adjectivizing
17. Mistake #4: Drowning in detail
18. Multitasking: Tone
19. Multitasking: Mood
20. Multitasking: Interaction
21. Multitasking: Oddities & Anomalies
22. Mistake #5: Textual Chunks
23. Synopsis
24. Narrative Flow: The ubiquitous elements
25. Polish: Synonym Weeding
26. Polish: Reasonable Assumptions
27. Polish: Deferred Narrative
28. Narrative Flow: The endpoint
29. Narrative Flow: The In-between
30. Breakpoint 3

In the following chapter of the e-book, I deal with the remaining stages that turn the results of stages one to three into polished, concise, flowing, narrative.

The whole is so large that I'm only going to be able to touch on each step or process fairly briefly. The goal here is to present an overview - and a whole bunch of tips along the way. Many of these deserve expansion into a full article in their own right, and in some cases, that has already been done. Where that's the case, I'll link to those articles.

A sidebar on Style

Everyone has their own writing style, but the targets of style remain the same: clear, effective, and interesting communication of whatever the writer is trying to communicate. However, differences in style can make a big difference to the amount of effort required.

I aim for a natural style that flows in much the same way as it would if I were having a conversation. This has the advantage of requiring less polishing and refinement; other people and purposes demand or desire a more formal style. The downside is that it tends to come off sounding more authoritative than is necessarily intended. It's never my intent to suggest "this is THE way, the ONLY way, to do [X]" - just that this is the way that works for me, or that I think will work for me.

For RPG purposes, my usual style has big advantages because it treats any narrative text as *something to be communicated to the players*. I get similar advantages employing it to write blog posts. It means that I can simply get on with the writing and not worry about the niceties too much.

Always keep the intended delivery method in mind, and write to that intended application of your words.

A second sidebar on style

The other important consideration in terms of style is the intended audience. If you are writing to a relatively specific target group, such as your players, there is always a certain amount of explanation that can be taken as read; you will have many frames of reference in common. The more you expand the target, the more assumed knowledge and context you have to explain. This trips me up all the time when expanding something written for one of my RPGs into a blog post.

If I'm writing for my player's benefit, I only have to name a prominent NPC and a flood of backstory becomes accessible to them that provides immediate context to whatever I have to say. If I'm writing for my readers here at Campaign Mastery, I have to fill in at least part of that context *without hindering the flow of the main narrative*, but I can still assume a certain degree of familiarity with common gaming terms and usages. If I write for the general public, I not only can't assume any of that inherent background knowledge, but I have to explain things that we gamers take for granted - and do so in such a way as not to bore the pants off anyone who already knows it, just to make the process harder.

Always remember who you are writing for; anything you can reasonably assume they already know is something you don't have to explain, letting you get on with the meaningful content.

Stage 1: Preliminaries:

The first stage is concerned with preparing to write. These preliminaries deal with the mechanics of writing, and are something that changes with the technology available. The process that I employ now is very different to the process that I would have had to employ back in the days of manual typewriters and no internet.

1. Organization & Planning

The first step is always to know what you are trying to write about. What's the point of your communication, what are you trying to achieve? Do you have everything that you need in order to write without interruption? This step ensures that you have all the tools you need, from printer paper to internet access. It also covers when you are going to write and how your time is going to be organized.

2. Placeholders

As I explained in [One word at a time: How I \(usually\) write a Blog Post](#), I break an article down into discrete components - sections and subsections - before I start writing. I employ the same technique when writing an RPG adventure with only minor differences. I employed a similar strategy to generate the bullet list used in the example in Chapter 1 of this series - floor, walls, ceiling, what's in front and what's behind. In the more compressed, more stylish form of the example, the same pattern can be observed, though I've inserted a general impression at the top of the list.

Each of these sections and subsections is a placeholder. When it comes to a blog post, they usually become headings and subheadings. When writing for an RPG, sections become paragraphs and subsections become specific content to be incorporated into that paragraph.

Quite often, if there is a substantial gap between planning and execution, the shorthand labels that you use to summarize your intent - the headings and subheadings - can become obscure, the meaning forgotten. Whenever I think there is any risk whatsoever of that happening, I will incorporate a "sub-subheading" that synthesizes what is meant. That leaves me free to be highly compact when the meaning is more obvious.

3. Use a scratch document

I always write in a scratch document. The simpler the word processor you use, the better, at least for your first drafts; if you have few or no formatting options, you have no distractions from the process of actually putting one word after another. In fact, when writing an e-book, I try to work on each article or chapter in a separate document - so that if there is a catastrophic failure of some kind, or I chase my tail down a blind alley, I can lose that part without losing the whole.

It's called modular thinking, the notion that you break whatever you have to write down into discrete chunks and work on them individually, then assemble the whole; if you find that one "plug-in module" isn't right, you can pull it out and rework it without affecting the whole.

In terms of RPGs, I tend to break an adventure down into acts, then into scenes within the act, as though I were working on a play or on a TV/movie script. Each Act will usually then become a separate sub-document, as self-contained as possible. When it's finished, copy-and-paste inserts the draft into the main document.

The big advantage of this approach is that I can keep both the main document and the current chapter open in separate windows at the same time. I will often use plain-text for the draft and a richer file format for the compilation (which opens with different software) so that this approach is naturally implemented for me by the computer software.

It goes further. I can use placeholders in my draft to indicate the need to insert an illustration or a table, then generate those separately, again using copy-and-paste when compiling the main document. This enables me to choose the best tool for whatever the job is at the moment.

Even when writing an email, I will frequently employ the same approach - drafting the content in a scratch document and then copy-and-pasting into the email itself. I find that preferable because if I try writing the email in the actual email web-page or client, I will often find that I've been logged off by the time I'm ready to hit 'send'.

4. Index by placeholder

When writing an adventure, placeholders usually include the names of NPCs and location references. At the top of the scratch document, I'll keep a master list of these placeholders and the acts/scenes in which they participate. These are accumulated in the main document when compiling it, and then sorted by act/scene. That mandates using a consistent format throughout the adventure, but it makes it much easier to refer back to their last appearance within the adventure.

This has so many advantages it's hard to know where to start. I can write all of an NPC's canned dialogue for the whole adventure at once, so that they always have a consistent speech pattern. I can evolve a description over the course of its appearances within the adventure, so that [Lessons From The West Wing III: Time Happens In The Background](#). I can describe a setting or location and add further details as they become relevant, i.e. noticeable by, or significant to, the players. It's also convenient for the generation of Tables of Contents (ToCs) such as the list earlier in this article, which in turn enables me to see "the whole plan" at once.

In terms of narrative, it means that I can put the bullet points into a logical sequence and get an overall flow to the narrative that makes sense, simply by reordering the individual snippets of text being indexed with copy and paste.

Let me expound a little more on this point. The order in which I write passages of text can be whatever is most efficient and need not have any resemblance to the order in which they will appear in the finished adventure. When the time comes to compile the material in the scratch document into a coherent whole, I can (1) copy-&-paste a duplicate of the final order; (2) select-and-cut the text snippets that combine to make up that scene or act one at a time, then (3) paste it immediately after the appropriate index entry in the duplicate list. The placeholder then becomes a heading or subheading with the content immediately following it.

At a campaign level, there are even more advantages to be extracted from this approach. You can keep a separate document for each NPC and compile, as you go, a copy of *every appearance that NPC makes*. Such an NPC "contact dossier", when preceded by any game mechanics like stats, becomes incredibly useful when the same NPC makes a return appearance weeks or months later. What's more, by reviewing the "contact dossier" before you start writing, you can immediately assess the last-established status quo of the character (so that you can evolve their circumstances), and can facilitate consistency of personality across both appearances.

Finally, by keeping all your "contact dossiers" in a single folder dedicated to that purpose, you can avoid the mistake of using the same name for two different characters - which can otherwise happen at the most inconvenient and confusing times.

5. The retention of progress

Save your work. Do it often. I do it at the end of each section or subsection, and before starting any sort of major revision. Another big advantage of the modular approach is that you can save your progress without updating the master document, so that you are not committed to anything permanently - with most word processors, loading an existing version of the document doesn't permit you to backtrack through past changes, each session starts off with a clean "undo" list.

Whenever I start a major update, for example formatting the final document, I will always work on a copy - and then overwrite the master version only when I'm sure that what has just been saved is correct. This lets me always fall back to the last point at which everything was right - something that has saved my bacon any number of times.

6. Checklist

When one will be useful, I prepare a checklist of things to do, and prioritize them according to their degree of necessity. I've offered several ways of such prioritization in past articles - [Fire Fighting, Systems Analysis, and RPG Problem Solving Part 2 of 3: Prioritization](#) for example.

When you have unlimited time, you want to tick off every last item on that checklist. When you're up against a deadline, with limited time between now and then, that may not be practical, which is where the article linked to above becomes more useful.

It's helpful to have a general master checklist that you can use time and time again. Don't rely on memory if you don't have to - the one time you forget to spell-check will inevitably be the time you make a horrendous spelling mistake. Why? Because you will have also forgotten on other occasions, and without that terrible blunder to point it out to you, you will not have noticed. Hence, items seem to get missed only at the worst possible times - when you're in a hurry, and you've made a colossal blunder, and are already stressed and under pressure. It's a confluence of circumstances that inevitably bites you on the tail.

7. Breakpoint 1

When you have ensured that everything is ready to go, the first thing to do is STOP. At the end of each of the major stages of writing, take a break and clear your mind. This is infinitely preferable to interrupting a major stage because you *need* to take a break. Believe me, it will actually be more efficient to take a break now (even if you don't think you need one, or are eager to get going) than it will be to accommodate unscheduled pauses that break your chain of thought when neck-deep in the act of being creative.

Sidebar: Efficiency Lessons from OH&S

I don't know about other countries, but here in Australia, the Public Service Union is one of the strongest and best organized in terms of protecting the workforce and maximizing efficiency. You can generally take their OH&S guidelines as a solid representation of 'best practice' for ensuring productivity and long-term occupational health.

There have been studies that show that taking a 10-minute break or more every 2 hours actually results in higher productivity than not doing so. So the Australian Public Service recommends taking scheduled 10-minute breaks every hour so that you can miss one when you have to and still hit the real target. Get up, stretch, walk around, get a beverage, relax. Read a book, play cards, whatever. The mental relief is as important as being away from a computer screen. While individual needs may vary, it's still a good foundation that enables you to focus on working hard and efficiently the rest of the time. You will get more done.

I employ a cheat: I put a CD on when I start work, and take a ten-minute break when it finishes playing. These are usually between 45 and 75 minutes long, so this technique takes all the clock-watching and stress out of the situation.

Sidebar: Enough sleep

I am going to do a separate article on this subject at Campaign Mastery at some later point. For now, suffice it to say that people need a lot less sleep than you think - if you manage it properly.

Sleep can be broken into two parts: a 30-minute part and a 60-minute part. These two form a repeating cycle while you sleep, from the moment you fall asleep. You want to wake up during that 30-minute window. Naps should be less than 30 minutes long. Allow time to actually fall asleep. Plan your wakeup time accordingly.

There's a lot more to say on the subject, but I'll save that for that separate article I mentioned. For now, suffice it to say: You will be more creative, more productive, more healthy, and more happy if you get enough sleep.

Stage 2: Bullet-pointing:

So you know what you're going to write about, and you have your workspace and tools all organized; you're fresh and ready to go. The place to start is bullet-pointing, as explained earlier.

Bullet-pointing captures the maximum number of thoughts in the shortest space of time per thought. It forces brevity. If you have to, you can even run an adventure that's been bullet-pointed with no additional prep.

An example of bullet-pointing Scenes to appear within an Act from an RPG might be:

- ◆ Back-door call to PCs
- ◆ Lab Location, description
- ◆ Meet Research Director
- ◆ Meet Lab Assistant
- ◆ Told of Lab Purpose
- ◆ Consultation by Museum
- ◆ Strange Discovery
- ◆ Reported to Authority
- ◆ Disappearance of Researcher
- ◆ A Cover-up?
- ◆ Decision to involve PCs

I've actually been a little more explicit in the above list than I might be when actually writing the scene. Instead of "Lab Location, description", I would probably just write "Lab"; instead of "Meet Research Director" I would simply say "Research Director".

8. Multitasking: Personality

Characters are the heart and soul of RPGs. When compiling a bullet-point list, I always try and capture the personalities of the NPCs and institutions involved. If I am describing a scene, as I did in the earlier example, I will decide what personality I want the location to have and use that as my starting point. It is so much easier to proceed in this way than to try and tack a personality in afterwards, because it means that I can be actively looking for ways in which to display that personality, and because it means that the personality of the subject can influence the content instead of being superficially tacked on.

The easiest approach is to actually append a superficial personality profile, just a word or two long, after their introduction in the scene. "Research Director - Stuffy, Worried" is a lot more useful than just "Research Director".

Point-of-view is always something to bear in mind as a subtext within the Personality consideration. If I'm describing the scene where something happened, I always bear in mind the personality of whoever was responsible even if they are not an active presence in the scene. I will usually include such a presence as a bullet-point item, but put it in brackets as a reminder. Of course, if I have a contact dossier, all I need to do is reference that dossier.

9. Visualize

It's a lot easier for you to visualize a scene in your imagination and then describe what you "see" than it is to describe it without doing so. It's also a lot more effective - after all, if you can't visualize the scene, how can you expect your players to do so? Throughout the bullet-point example above, I was picturing the Research Director constantly wringing his hands with worry. I have no idea *why* he's worried - perhaps it's just that he's going outside the usual routine, perhaps he's taking a risk that makes him uncomfortable, or perhaps he's a concerned boss - or perhaps he's guilty of something and worried he will be discovered.

The bullet point notation, "worried," not only serves as a reminder as to the behavior to keep in mind while writing the scene, it reminds that there needs to be an explanation for this behavior. What's more, the rest of the personality should intimate this reason - insisting that the PCs sign in and wear passes at all times suggests the first reason for the worry, eyes darting back and forth while he asks if this can be kept off-the-record suggests the second, exhibiting concern for the lab assistant suggests the third, and a statement that "getting you involved was not my idea" leaves room for the fourth while suggesting a fifth, some form of prejudice against the PCs, or against their presence if it can be viewed as a rebuke of his management of the facility.

Throughout the law-firm example, I was able to visualize both the appearance and the layout quite clearly from the very beginning, and simply sketched in additional details as each element presented itself for further delineation within the bullet list. Nor is the version of the bullet list provided the same as the one I initially came up with - one idea suggested another, which suggested still another; they were subsequently placed in logical order to make the connections to the more "stylish" version clearer to readers. But that's getting ahead of myself.

10. Reference

The other sort of notation that I will make on the bullet list is a connection to any reference material I have, or that I need to locate. This might be a map, it might be a photograph, it might be to an RPG supplement, it might be to a contact dossier, it might be to an earlier adventure in which one or more elements might be located. In particular, in the above list, "Strange Discovery" is a little vague and needs to be more explicitly described.

Not only will I list any research required, I will actively seek out the sources at this point. You want to collect your research before you start writing so that it can be incorporated into narrative consistently. If, for example, I'm thinking of something strange about the axes of atomic rotation in whatever was being tested, I will want to know how these things occur in nature, how they are detected, and what the machines used for such analysis look like. I may want to research "Magnetic Resonance".

If I wanted whatever it was to have a different radiological signature, I will want to research radioactive decay and elements with unusual half-lives so that I know what the strangeness is. I will want to know about isotope identification. Since the chemical properties of different isotopes

tend to be the same, I know that a spectrograph won't do that job - so, while I might note that a mass spectrometer might be normal equipment for a lab handling such analyses, it won't be especially prominent, and will get mentioned in passing if at all.

11. Polish: Sensory Cues

Once I have all my reference material, and have at least a preliminary idea of what it says, I will go back over my bullet list and add to it. The first of several steps that polish the material, I want to note any specific sensory cues other than the visual for incorporation. Sounds and Smells are the big two; taste and touch tend to be less frequent, though they may be present in specific items where they are relevant.

12. Bullet Points

Here's a simple checklist: general impression, front, sides, back, top, bottom, the obvious. That's the sort of checklist that I use when describing a room or location. Step 12 of the writing process is to go back over the bullet-point list making sure that nothing has been left out. For example, in the "laboratory" example, some notes on the missing researcher should be in place, and while I have described the *Institution* there is no description of the actual lab where the strangeness took place. There should be something about whether or not the Lab Assistant was present when whatever happened transpired, and if not, why not. And who were the authorities? And what raised suspicions of a cover-up, and why aren't the lab personnel going along with it? There's a lot more detail needed, and each of these needs a bullet point. In addition, I would add bullet points for the results of any research.

If the layout of the facility was going to be important, the time to at least roughly sketch out a map is *before* you start writing descriptions.

Another example, this time from the law-firm example, are the combined water features / drinking fountains. I can see these quite clearly in my mind's eye, even now - but I gave minimal description in the bullet-point list. This is the point at which I might draw a quick sketch to help me make it clear - but, since this is a relatively unimportant piece of the description, I probably wouldn't bother.

13. Breakpoint 2

Creating the bullet points involves a solid burst of creativity. When they are finished, it's time to take another break. You need to clear your head of everything that's irrelevant to the next step - and everything that's relevant should now be in note form, ready for expansion.

Stage 3: Narrative Organization:

I made the point that by this time you have a collection of bullet points that aren't necessarily in order. Stage three is about putting these points in the order that you want to use them in the final narrative, adding details and further notes as you go. Often, you will draft a small snippet of finished narrative as you go.

This is a stage that a lot of people seem to struggle with, or that people ignore only to find themselves in difficulty in subsequent stages. Your goal in this stage is to decide on the flow of the narrative, the order in which you want your bullet points to be presented to whoever your material is intended for - whether that's players in an RPG or the readership of a blog, article, or e-book.

14. Mistake #1: A sentence to each bullet point

I want to start detailing this stage by making specific mention of common mistakes that people make. I consider the active avoidance of these mistakes to be something that is just as important as the more constructive steps in the process.

The first such mistake is usually putting each bullet point in a sentence by itself. To illustrate, let's take the first three or four bullet points from the law firm list *as I originally wrote them* and translate them improperly:

- ◆ Central **elevator** - to reception.
- ◆ **Corridors** - H pattern, broad enough stations each side.
- ◆ **Reception** - company logo. Patriotic colors plus gold. Glass backing.
- ◆ Luxurious **carpets**, custom.
- ◆ **Walls** - wood panelings, none bare.

Compare that with the version presented earlier, where each of these has become sentences:

- ◆ A central **elevator** opens to main reception.
- ◆ **Corridors** are in a H pattern, broad enough for secretarial stations to line each side.
- ◆ A central **reception area** with company logo in Gold against splashes of red, white, and blue on frosted glass.
- ◆ Luxurious soft **carpets**, custom-designed & fitted.
- ◆ The **walls** are polished wood panels. Walls are never empty, each has something - usually a **portrait** or photograph of a past or current partner. Some date back to the firm's founding in 1863. They are all exactly the same size and hung at the same height in identical frames.

Now imagine yourself reading these aloud, exactly as they stand. Is this narrative that sings? Not by a long shot!

Always look for ways to bundle related items together. Don't start describing one thing, break off to describe another, then return to describing the first thing - and treat these categories of information as broadly in definition as possible. Don't, for example, describe one wall, and then the paintings on that wall, and then the next wall, and the paintings on that wall, and then.... well, you get the idea. Put all the walls together into one bundle.

15. Mistake #2: The Six Surfaces

At the same time, don't repeat yourself. Collect like together with like, and make sure that you have every surface covered (floor, walls, ceiling for a room). The number of times I've seen people describe walls, furniture, and decorations in loving detail while failing to even mention the floor or ceiling is astonishing.

If you're describing an outdoors scene, treat it as though it were being projected onto the walls of an imaginary room. Use this to make sure that you're leaving nothing important out.

16. Mistake #3: Over-adjectivizing

Contemplate the following: "The small shimmering scales were opalescent beads of gold, with rainbow-like speckles of intense red, earthy brown, and pure white, joined by brightly-gleaming yellow golden scales of minuscule size, visible only upon close inspection." Or, "the high-backed chair of soft velvet was well-padded and adorned with brightly-colored purple cushions filled with the softest down, matching in intensity the ruby-red velvet backing and rich, well-polished, deeply stained hardwood."

Some writers seem to think that every detail that is described needs an adjective or three. Most of the time, one is too many - prune back to one for the entire object. You aren't making the object more real in the readers'/players' minds by overloading them with adjectives.

Even more to the point, use an adjective only to modify or contrast expectations raised by the general impression. A "richly-appointed chair" gives sufficient impression for most purposes. Adding "velvet" to that description is just about permissible because it tells you something about the construction. Don't bother mentioning the wood, or the wood-stain; these are implied. Don't describe them as soft until someone sits in one. Unless there is something notable or important about the cushions, they can pretty much be taken as read. Ditto any carving of the back or legs.

Be minimalist in your adjectives.

17. Mistake #4: Drowning in detail

This is a very easy mistake to make; it's necessary to be constantly vigilant. In general, too much detail leads to too many adjectives, and too many adjectives tends to imply too much detail. What do your targets *need* to know? What do you *need* to *specifically* mention beyond what's in the general impression?

Is there a more general, more inclusive term that can be used to refer collectively to the things that you are describing? Do you have to specifically detail both chairs and tables, or can you substitute "Dining Room furniture" - or simply "furniture"? - which can then be described all in one statement.

At the same time, don't bother describing the settee when it's the stuffing spilling out of the cut in the chair that's of interest - unless the material of the chair makes the cut more significant. A chair of dragonscale is worth mentioning in this context, for example, because of the implied resistance to being cut.

Every detail that you explicitly mention should be relevant to the function or role of the object of the description.

18. Multitasking: Tone

There are a few things to keep actively in mind in a positive way while compiling your bullet points. The first is the tone that you want the object of your description to have.

Tone defines the emotionality of the circumstances that you want to convey, through a restriction on the vocabulary that you employ. If the tone you want is "Gothic Horror", terms like "frilly" should be nowhere to be seen. On the other hand, if soft and romantic is the objective, then it might be entirely appropriate. It can be thought of as an emotional context.

Now is the time to decide on the tone that you want and actively cut or rephrase to achieve that tone.

19. Multitasking: Mood

Mood and tone work hand-in-hand. Mood defines the specific emotional direction or pattern that is to exist within the Tone. Is the mood to be oppressive, ominous, threatening, sad, up-beat? Mood relates more to events within the narrative, but can be manipulated to a certain extent simply by the sequence of details. The use of color, the use of language, the phrasing of descriptions, and the choice of which details to focus on, all manipulate the mood. The emotional state of characters (NPCs, in the case of a game) is also a driver of Mood more than Tone. Events and their sequence project mood, and more specifically, function to transition whatever the mood is prior to the scene and alter it in some respect.

Some moods simply don't work very well in some tonal choices, and may need careful treatment. Others come naturally.

Mood has three roles to play at this point: first, one of the valid reasons for inclusion of details is to generate or isolate the desired mood; second, assessing the mood of the existing events; and third, supplementing the events with others of specific tonal value in order to alter the mood within the overall scene or act.

For more on mood I refer you to my article on [***emotional pacing in RPGs: Part One***](#) and [***Part Two***](#). You might also find [***People, Places, and Narratives: Matching Locations to plot needs***](#) relevant at this point.

Decide on what the mood should be. Constantly monitor what the mood is, then insert or remove items to achieve that mood - but, if you remove anything essential, bear in mind that you will have to put it in *somewhere*.

20. Multitasking: Interaction

Another thing to keep in mind while working on this stage of the writing process is the interactions that you want your characters (fiction) or the PCs (RPG) to have with the circumstances and events around them. You want to be constantly aware of how events steer the characters, and how the characters steer events, and in particular for an RPG, how the players can steer events in directions other than those forecast in your outline.

Certain bullet points are calls to action, and these are high-risk points in terms of potential departures from plans. There are three possible reactions to such departures: you can try to force the players back on track, you can try to lead them back on track, or you can be prepared for them to off-track.

The first is never recommended, as is the variation of never giving the players a choice of action. The second is possible but if manipulation is detected by players, it is generally resented. The best solution - and the most difficult - is the third one. Which is why there is so much GMing advice out there on how to do it.

Branch points - or points at which there is a higher than normal chance of divergence - should be noted by the author as they arise, and notes on how to handle them incorporated as you go.

The other piece of advice that should be noted in this context is *direction*. When moving from item to item, think about how the characters eyes are moving - if you start going left to right, don't interrupt that by mentioning the ceiling unless there is something hanging from it within the character's eye-line. Left to right, right to left, up to down, down to up, forward - these are all valid directions. Organize your descriptions appropriately.

21. Multitasking: Oddities & Anomalies

That's already quite a lot to think about, but there's one thing more to add to the stack: Oddities. As a general rule of thumb, less attention should be devoted to what fits within the boundaries of what has already been described or established within the narrative passage, and more attention given to things that don't fit.

If you enter a clearing and it contained a charging dragon, how much attention would you pay to the color of the leaves on the trees? If you enter a room and some points a machine gun in your direction, don't expect people to notice the wallpaper.

Have a good reason for any oddities that occur; if it doesn't fit, and it isn't necessary, think about cutting it. And if it *is* important, detail it - bearing in mind that an oddity of any sort is quite likely to provoke an action / reaction from the PCs.

22. Mistake #5: Textual Chunks

Sometimes, a writer will have small snippets of text already written. The best way of organizing these into a coherent narrative is to summarize these into bullet points, identifying each passage by means of paragraph numbering.

For example, *"Quantum vibrations in the time stream are detectable, if the accumulated sum of such vibrations reach a certain threshold, and every event causes these vibrations. The more substantial the event, the greater the vibrations. Time traveling past such events is akin to jogging through an Earthquake, The Quantum Discriminator detects such significant events and measures their significance so that I know what to avoid."*

If this little piece of exposition were the fourth pre-generated by the author, it would be given the index entry E4 (E for "Exposition") and a bullet point entry created which reads "E4 - Temporal Earthquakes".

Now, the only reason why this particular piece of exposition would be important is because the character is about to experience such an event, or - more likely - has just done so. That means that there needs to be a separate item on the bullet list: Experience Temporal Earthquake."

But that alone would still not be enough to justify the presence of this one-two piece of narrative. To be truly significant, there need to be two further bullet points - one that reads "establish location in space-time", and a second that reads "There shouldn't *be* a TQ at these coordinates."

Personally, I would consider dividing this exposition up. This enables the description of the Quantum Discriminator to be separated from the event which triggers it, giving more flexibility in the ordering of the bullet points. The entire first sentence is pretty much redundant, for example. You don't need it, and its inclusion might interfere with the smooth flow of the final narrative. Smaller chunks gives greater flexibility, so break them up.

23. Synopsis

Bearing all these things in mind, and having further populated your bullet points list as necessary, it's almost time to start organizing your bullet points into the order they will appear in the finished narrative.

The starting point that I always employ is a synopsis. It's usually preferable to put this in writing so that you can refer back to it. If you can get this down to a single sentence, so much the better. There will be times when I will create a synopsis before I start listing bullet points, and this is entirely acceptable.

When two narrative blocks should be one:

When you find that your general impressions of the areas are the same, and the content is similar or fits a continuous motion, it is usually more effective to combine two narrative blocks into the one. The only common exception is when there are inserted sections - dialogue or action - that are sufficiently different in style or content that they need to be separated from each other. This employs the descriptive narrative as punctuation to separate those other elements.

If you consider the narrative structure described earlier for the law-office example, you will find a section towards the end of the structure that looks like this:

- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence (cont): ...past water features...*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: Description of Water Features
- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence (cont): ...past fish-tank...*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: Description of Fish-tank
- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence (cont): ...to the meeting room*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: Description of Meeting Room

At the time I made the comment that each of these represents an opportunity for a new dialogue or action passage. If this was lending too much importance and activity to the sequence at the law firm, however, you might instead choose:

- ◆ *Inserted Action Sequence (cont):to the Meeting room.*
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block: General Impression of water features, fish-tank, meeting room.
 - ◆ Additional Narrative Block (cont): Details of meeting room.

Until you reach an endpoint, specified as a trigger for a significant dialogue or action sequence, it is all part of the one narrative block, and should be treated as such.

Sidebar: "Significant" dialogue?

The observant will have noted that I slipped a new qualifying term into the preceding statement: "Significant" dialogue or action. Significance requires that the text in question have a specific purpose beyond color and embellishment. That purpose may be to require a decision on the part of the PCs or an activity in response to events, or it may be to establish the personality of an NPC because that is going to be important to subsequent scenes or to the PCs interpretation of this scene.

If your dialogue doesn't meet this criterion, it can be considered just another way of expressing the narrative, and should not form a break-point within the narrative block - which means that your two narrative blocks should, in fact, be one.

When one narrative block should be two or more:

It's at least as common to encounter a narrative block that tries to incorporate too much. This leads to situations in which the GM has to interrupt the narration to deal with a PC response to the content, then resume, even though resuming at that point has broken the flow of the game.

It's up to the PCs when they react. It follows that there must be no cause for them to react until the entire scene is described to them or there will be subsequent complaints of "I wouldn't have done [x] if I had known [y]".

The most usual cause of this problem is the choice of flow within the sequence. Because a trigger for interaction of some sort is always the signal to end the narration, such should always be the last item in the narration, and **everything that the PCs need to know** must, therefore, precede it.

While there are too many permutations of the possibilities to list them all, one or two examples should serve: Never, ever, describe an NPC before you have finished describing the environment around them. Never describe a piece of the environment that a PC might choose to interact with before describing any other elements with which they might interact, even if that means that the two have to be contained within the one sentence, i.e. the one action trigger. For an example of that, don't mention a chest in the room as part of the description if you are describing a dungeon scene if there is some creature guarding it - instead, fuse both calls to action into the one statement: "Guarding a chest in the middle of the room is..."

24. Narrative Flow: The ubiquitous elements

Once you have an idea of what the narrative passage is intended to convey, it's time to do a rough sorting of the bullet points. I start with the Ubiquitous elements - these are anything that can be wholly subsumed by the general impression, or that should form part of that general impression; in other words, anything that will be present throughout the narrative text block. If necessary, I create a new bullet point at the top of the list to contain it.

25. Polish: Synonym Weeding

Once I have the ubiquitous elements listed, the next step is to go through the bullet points and cut or rephrase anything that is synonymous with one or more of those elements. In particular, any adjectives that are implied by a ubiquitous element should be expunged from the remaining bullet points.

26. Polish: Reasonable Assumptions

The next thing that I look to eliminate from the bullet point list is anything that can reasonably be assumed to be present and of no further note. The Law-firm example didn't list cleaning closets or rest rooms, for example. But, going beyond that, is there anything so mundane that it can be reasonably assumed to exist?

If I say "Police Station", I don't need to list the front desk unless there's something unusual about it - in which case, I don't want to write about the desk, I want to write about the unusual feature. If I say Fire Station, the presence of Fire Trucks doesn't need to be mentioned; the existence of so many bays is enough to imply a truck in each bay. An electrical sub-station implies cables and transformers. Get rid of anything you can reasonably assume to be present. Heck, a Lasker Wave Detector implies that such a thing as Lasker Waves exist; you don't necessarily need to define and describe them, what you care about is what causes them, and therefore, what the presence of such waves implies.

But don't eliminate these entirely; move them to the bottom of the list and cross them off. If your word processor supports no other way of doing so, you can underline them. My preferred method is to use a different font color like red, which is fairly self-explanatory. The reason is that you may want to reinsert some of these at a later point for reasons of characterization.

Remember, what you are compiling is not a set decoration work-order! You don't have to list everything. Don't bother listing a telephone on every office desk unless that's highly unusual for the setting.

27. Polish: Deferred Narrative

Next, I move to the end of the list anything that can be deferred. What don't you need to describe or explain right now? This is one of the primary acts illustrated by the generation of the concise Law Office description - there was an awful lot of detail that didn't have to be mentioned right away.

This is a little trickier when it comes to RPGs, as I pointed out in discussing [Good Storytelling Technique Or Bad? – Chekhov’s Gun and RPGs](#).

In a nutshell, if the players are going to be looking for something, you need to mention it up front. If not, it can be deferred until such a time as it becomes relevant.

28. Narrative Flow: The endpoint

We have now excluded everything that doesn't need to be part of this particular narrative passage. We also have the content that is to form the general introduction and eliminated any redundancy that results, in other words, the beginning; and we have all the things that we need to take into account identified, and - hopefully - documented. As I noted in the law-office example, anything to which the players should be expected to respond, or that will lead into a dialogue scene or a different narrative passage such as an action sequence, should be the last thing in the narrative flow. The next step is therefore to select the endpoint of the narrative passage, which *must* be one of those types of passage elements.

You *always* have to end your narrative block with either a transition to a different narrative block, to an action of some kind, to a passage of dialogue, or - in the case of an RPG - with something that demands interaction with one or more players of some sort. If you don't have one of these, you need to create and insert one.

29. Narrative Flow: The In-between

With beginning and end-point identified, all that remains is to establish the order of the bits in the middle. Is there some logical flow between those established points? I mentioned some of the possibilities earlier, but there are more, too many to list, depending on the nature of the narrative passage. Here are a couple more to contemplate: Input to Output, Cause to Effect, Mundane to Unusual, Outside to Inside, Macro to Micro, even Wet to Dry or vice-versa.

Look at the start and the endpoints, and identify the differences between what is being initially described and what is being described at the end. There will always be *some* difference, and often there will be more than one. What you want is the one that forms a natural progression through the majority of the in-between elements.

In the case of the law-firm example, I went from down to up, then to what was immediately in front (up to specific center) which led logically to the receptionist. From there, I could either go directly to the dialogue, or to a description of the receptionist - either of which meets the requirements of the endpoint as listed in the previous section.

This approach works no matter what the narrative block is about. It could be describing the appearance of a deity within a temple or the precessing of the watchmaguffins; the appearance of a pirate ship to the disappearance of a magician. With practice, it becomes almost instinctive, and you no longer need to actually carry out many of the steps - though it is always a good idea to tick each off on a checklist to ensure that you have at least thought about whether or not a given step is necessary for this particular narrative passage.

Narrative Flow and Reciprocating Perspective

Unless you have good reason to vary it, you can often achieve more "punch" and greater seamlessness in your narrative passages if each employs the opposite perspective flow as the narrative block that precedes it. For example, if the preceding narrative block flows left-to-right, try to use a right-to-left flow in the one you are currently working on. The only time this doesn't work is when a motion or change of perspective is incorporated in the call to interaction at the end of the preceding narrative block, which supersedes the established flow.

However, this seamlessness and punch comes at a price: mental fatigue on the part of the reader/player. You are making them subconsciously work harder because they can't compartmentalize each piece of the scene, just add to it. "L-to-R, R-to-L, L-to-R, R-to-L" has an obvious problem. The pattern itself becomes somewhat hypnotic, eyes will begin to glaze over, and important details can be missed. The solution is to ensure that there is some superseding motion incorporated after every one or two such narrative blocks.

I have seen this problem occur quite frequently when too much diversity is incorporated into an area, for example making all four walls of a room significantly different. Consider the description of a room with five alcoves, one directly ahead and two each on the left and right walls respectively, each with different content. Rather than describing each as part of the one narrative block, give a general impression and mention the arrangement of alcoves, but only describe the content of the one directly in front; then have the PCs move into the room before they can see the contents of the other alcoves, and then only the two closest to the entrance. Build up the description of the room rather than overloading the one narrative block. This is especially true if the content of each alcove requires detailed description with its own internal narrative flow. Employed within limits, reciprocating perspective can be a powerful tool. Over-used, it overloads the description, and indicates that the narrative needs to be broken up and punctuated with a small action of some kind.

30. Breakpoint 3

Once you have your bullet list boiled down and sequenced properly, it's time to clear your head of all those things that were used in this stage. All those mistakes to avoid and things to bear in mind are now embedded and embodied in the sequence of bullet points that you have compiled, so you're all set to begin the process of turning it into polished text - which carries with it a whole new set of things to bear in mind. So now is the right time to take another break and prepare yourself mentally for the fourth stage of the narrative writing process.

Chapter 3: Words, Like Raindrops, Fall

This chapter details the process of converting the bullet points created in Chapter 2 into polished narrative. The remaining steps in the process – and I do view it all as one single process, hence the continued numbering from the first three stages of the process – and, hence, the primary subjects for discussion in this part of the article, are:

Stage 4: Narrative Construction:

- 31. Multitasking: Write from what's been said
- 32. Multitasking: Write to what comes next
- 33. Multitasking: Insert Activity & Dynamics
- 34. Expansion, Expression, and Compilation
- 35. Reality Check: No Longer Than It Has To Be
- 36. Breakpoint 4

Stage 5: Narrative First Review:

- 37. Reality Check: Re-read and Review
- 38. Reality Check: Visualization
- 39. Revision 1: Visualization and Clarity
- 40. Breakpoint 5

Stage 6: Second Review:

- 41. Revision 2: Compression
- 42. Reality Check: Re-read and Review 2
- 43. Revision 3: Blend to the break-point
- 44. Breakpoint 6

Stage 7: Final Polish:

- 45. Revision 4: Nuanced Synonyms
- 46. Reality Check: Re-read and Review 3
- 47. Reality Check: Vividness & Excitement
- 48. Revision 5: Flow, Visualization and Clarity
- 49. Repeat Stages 6-7 as necessary
- 50. Breakpoint 7

Stage 8: Completion:

- 51. Aggregate working
- 52. Index the aggregate
- 53. Archive the aggregate
- 54. Replace placeholders in master with final draft
- 55. Archive master checklist
- 56. Done! For Now

So, with no further ado, let's get to work...

Stage 4: Narrative Construction:

There are three things to maintain awareness of when turning an outline into actual prose. These are detailed in steps 31-33. Step 34 is the actual writing process, while step 35 determines whether or not to throw out that attempt and start this stage of the process over again.

31. Multitasking: Write from what's been said

It seems obvious, but it's actually relatively easy to trip over every now and then: what you write has to connect seamlessly to whatever it is that you've just written. And when that linkage breaks down, the default assumption (and mistake) that many writers seem to make is that it's the fault of the part that you're writing at the time, and not of the part that was just written. Equally invalid is the proposition that you are better to throw everything away and start over on both passages.

One quick test that can save you a lot of grief is to go over the bullet points that you have selected for inclusion, and ensure that you can discern from them what the progression was that you used to sequence them. Of course, this test doesn't work if there is an inadequate gap between organization of the bullet points and starting this step - one reason why I recommended taking a break from your work to clear your head at the end of Stage 3.

Looking at it another way, treat this as your last chance to get the narrative flow right.

If you have generated your bullet points from pre-existing prose, this step becomes all the more important. Many authors fall in love with their own prose or with a particular turn of phrase; the bullet points place some insulation between the original phrasing and the needs of the completed narrative passage.

32. Multitasking: Write to what comes next

If that was all there was to it, writing would be relatively easy. It's not. *At the same time*, you must always craft your words so that they set up and prepare the ground for whatever the next phrase is going to be, and - beyond that - for whatever the next block of narrative or interaction is

intended to be. You have to establish the context for what is to follow, and do so without repeating yourself or incorporating unnecessary text. And that's a lot harder once words are actually on the page.

If dialogue doesn't seem to be flowing naturally, many authors seem to blame their characters, or write and rewrite that dialogue, or give up and scrap whole swathes of their stories. In reality, the problem can lie with the preceding narrative text and the foundations that it lays for that dialogue; a different context or perspective (even if only subtly variant) can make all the difference in the world.

One of the major elements to be established in that narrative passage for context is micro-setting. Exactly where are the characters when the dialogue takes place? I don't care how lyrical and poetic your description of the place is, if it gets in the way of the dialogue, you have to at least *consider* changing the micro-setting. And it's all a lot less work if you choose your micro-setting correctly in the first place.

Micro-Settings:

I suppose I should explain what I mean by the term "micro-setting" even though I think it's fairly self-explanatory.

If the setting were a shopping mall, the micro-setting would define what the actual businesses around the characters were, and hence the sights, sounds, and smells that create the backdrop of whatever is happening.

Let's say that we're using the law firm example from part one. You can create a very different context for whatever is to take place by beginning your description before you even get there, setting up expectations in advance. These can either reinforce the overall description that you have in mind or can markedly contrast with it - though the latter is more difficult and always needs explanation within the scene.

For example, if the building were a run-down office block with fading paint peeling from the outside walls and an elevator that creaks and groans, your expectations of the law firm would be very different to the decadent polish of the actual description.

Or, if the building was polished and modern and well-maintained, you have all sorts of opportunities to describe the law offices before you actually get to them. Or, option three, the description used as an example might reflect the expectations raised by the trappings, only for the reality when the players/protagonists arrive to be very different.

Finally, remember that whatever the superficial appearances might be, they may bear little or no resemblance to the reality behind the scenes; but if you are going down that route, you will need to plant some subtle clues when describing that superficial appearance. These need to be sufficiently subtle as to not disturb the overall surface appearance, and even to go unnoticed; you certainly don't want to make a fuss about them. They have to be subliminal. It's also easy to be *too* subtle - so it's a fine line to walk.

What you write *now* always has to flow from what you wrote a moment ago *and* has to lead to whatever comes next. The second is generally much harder than the first, and is often where the real artistry of writing lies.

33. Multitasking: Insert Activity & Dynamics

The biggest trap that amateur writers fall into (excluding inadequate attention to the narrative block in the first place) is of describing their settings and micro-settings as still lifes, suspended in time. This can be a special danger when dealing with technical explanations as narrative blocks.

Narrative blocks work far more effectively if they contain activity and dynamics that express the throb and pulse of the activities that are occurring as the object of the narrative is being examined. With every type of text block - narrative, action, or dialogue - you should be looking to infuse as much from the other types of scenes as you can.

In action blocks, you want to incorporate little details from the descriptive bullet points that you set aside. In dialogue, you want more descriptive details, and you want movement and activity. And, in your narrative scenes, you definitely want activity, and you want dynamics so that the result is not a monotone whole. Dialogue is a little harder, because your players/protagonists will normally want to react to it, so it is generally better in a narrative passage to *describe* the background dialogue than to actually quote it.

These things don't happen in writing by accident.

Sure, you can always go back after the description passages are written and sprinkle them with such additional content, but this is fraught with the danger of disrupting the flow you have carefully constructed, of being too little, too much, or too attention-getting, or of exposing basic flaws in the scenes you have written such as crowds or background characters who don't react to events *and who should*.

This seems a relevant place to actually drop in something that I wanted to bring up in my recent article, [Dr Who and the secrets of complex characterization](#) but had to leave out for various reasons.

Sidebar: Actor contributions to characters

How much input do the actors have to the personality of the character they are portraying? Some people might think it's all in the script, and almost everything of significance *is* contained there, in terms of the immediate story. Some people might think that whatever is left is mostly in the vision of the producer or director, who can tell the actor what to do and how to do it on-set.

The fact is that while producer or director can override any choice, there are simply too many characters for them to do it all. In general, actors influence the characterization of the role they are playing in four ways (disregarding the image or associated baggage of the actor from past roles): the focus of their character's attention when lines are being delivered or action is taking place, the incidental movements and activities of their character at such times when they aren't doing something directly mandated by the script for the purposes of the immediate plot, the way they deliver their lines & actions (and in particular the emotional content they invest in them) and the expressions on their face when they act. That's a lot to think of while performing, never mind the cumulative impact of these things on other actor's performances, and is the reason why a lot of amateur actors give "wooden" performances.

These are what actors are referring to when they talk about another actor giving them a lot to work with, or being "generous", and what distinguishes a great actor from a not-so-great actor (using the term in a unisex manner, let me hasten to add). All these things add up to two things: characterization in action and believability in the role.

A production's executives and writers take on board these elements of the emergent persona being portrayed and a feedback loop is established, where the nuances that the actor is bringing to the role are used to refine the persona *as written* (perhaps with a little tweaking) and create springboards for the actor to further express their interpretation of the role.

Acting is a *process* and it is impossible to state in any generic way how much input the actor has on the personality of their role. They are one of several inputs to the characterization process. All that you can really say is that the longer the actor has in a given role, the more they will evolve it and the more substantial their cumulative contribution will be to it.

I would contend that it takes most of a season, if not a full season, for an actor's input to really shine through; they have to grow into the role and come to understand it themselves. Why doesn't this phenomenon cause a problem with movies? Why aren't personalities less well defined or expressed in the scenes that are filmed first? The answer is that much of the development work is done in rehearsals, and multiple takes, and that the best performances are extracted from the whole during the editing process, and furthermore, that many more takes are filmed than are possible under television schedules. So, while it may be there to some extent, it is relatively easily hidden from public scrutiny.

That doesn't mean that one medium is better or worse than the others, or actors within that medium more or less able; it means the skills required are different, and the two are not directly comparable.

When writing fiction or narrative, the author has to take the place of all these people, supplying all the creative inputs. Characters should always be doing something when speaking, and the background should always have something going on, even when describing a location. Even if the scene is supposed to be quiet, with no activity - when the characters have broken into an office block late at night, for example - you need to contrast that lack of activity with something going on in the distance in order to highlight the stillness of the setting.

Dynamics in writing:

Reviewing all the above, I note that I haven't really said enough about Dynamics in writing. Narrative blocks should never be monotone and expressionless; they should never fail to move the emotions of the players/reader in whatever direction is required (refer to my earlier series on *emotional pacing in RPGs*: [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#) for more on that subject).

34. Expansion, Expression, and Compilation

And so, with a clear idea of how the current bullet point is going to link to the previous one, and how it will lead inevitably to the next, and how all that fits into the bigger picture, and actively looking for opportunities to add activity and dynamism to the narrative, you are ready to take that bullet point and turn it into prose.

This step of the process essentially consists of three interactive and interrelated activities: Expansion, Expression, and Compilation.

- ◆ **Expansion** is the process of turning your intentionally-succinct bullet point into sentences with an acceptable grammatic form.
- ◆ **Expression** is the employment of specific terms and phrases to compact and deliver more strongly, more lyrically, or more poetically, but always more succinctly, what would otherwise take many more words to describe. In particular, it's about choosing synonyms and metaphors that impart or imply an overtone that supplements the actual words used elsewhere in the narrative block to clarify or enrich the depth of the prose.
- ◆ **Compilation** - Always look for a way to incorporate what you are trying to say into either the preceding sentence or the next. In general, it's easier creatively to choose the former (because it is already on the screen) and easier to choose in terms of work-flow to choose the latter (because it is *not* yet on the screen). This highlights one of the biggest differences to the writing process that a word processor makes possible - the ease of revision - relative to older manual writing techniques such as longhand with pen and paper or with a manual typewriter.

Sidebar: Longhand

One writer I once knew advocated doing a first draft in black-lead pencil with an eraser handy, then writing in ink over the top. Another took advantage of the contrast of red ink and black or blue to do a first draft in red pen and write the second draft over the top of it in darker ink. Both of these techniques have found electronic analogues in the word-processor approach that I employ in more modern times. For those employing the most basic technique of writing, I thought them worth pointing out.

Sidebar: Typewriters

You can write a novel with a typewriter, single spaced. I've done so. I don't recommend it - certainly, no publisher would even look at such a manuscript.

The editorial standard is generally double-spaced, i.e. one blank line for every line with text on it. This leaves room for notes and corrections, or at least it used to be - I'm not sure that this is still the case, in the modern era of word processors. It's certainly easy to write your manuscript single-spaced and tell your printer to use double-spacing for anyone who wants to employ the old-school approach. But if you are using the older technology, this is certainly the way to go.

Except for first drafts, where it is even better to use triple-spacing in many respects, allowing room for one line of corrections and another for the inserting of entire phrases and clauses or a complete redrafting of a line during the revision process. Just some food for thought.

How much to agonize

Writing should not be hard work. Writing *well* might be, but one of the important objectives of this process is to take as much of that "hard work" out of the process as possible. You already have enough to keep in mind during this phase of the literary process; this is not the time to agonize over your word choices. There will be plenty of time for that later - to decide that this word is not as effective or satisfactory as it could be, and to seek out replacements, and to sweat bullets over your choices. The goal right now is to get a first draft down and get the whole passage to *flow* seamlessly, and that means that your first choices are frequently not only good enough, but by moving you quickly to the next bullet point without interruption, can actually facilitate a better result in the long term.

35. Reality Check: No Longer Than It Has To Be

How much text should one bullet point become? How long is a piece of string?

There is no one right answer; it depends on what is being described in the narration, and on its purpose in terms of the greater whole, and on the genre conventions, and on the individual's writing style. Once you have your first draft of the entire narrative block, it's time to think about how long you want it to be in the final draft.

First drafts are notorious for being longer than necessary. That's fine, we'll make allowances, so use whatever length you think the finished product should be.

You can then apply some reasonable estimate of the number of words per line that you usually achieve if you think that necessary - again, something that will vary from individual to individual (I average 14.8 in the word processor that I use to draft these posts, but that can go down when page formatting is taken into account. I get about 12.5 in the fancier word processor that I currently use to format e-books and create PDFs, for example. 15 and 12 respectively are near enough if you need to use a word count).

But, realistically, a line count is good enough. So, if the actual line count of your first count is:

- **Target or less:** Gold star, Look for any additional content you can incorporate. Double-check dynamics and activity inclusion. You have room for more, so is there anything else you can add?
- **1-2 x Target:** On the money. Move on.
- **2-3 x Target:** If we hadn't chopped redundancies already, this would have been acceptable. As it stands, either your prose is too long-winded or your expectations are unrealistic.

Decide which by assessing the importance of this narrative passage to the big picture. Is your setting too complicated for your plot needs? Can you still convey what you have to by skipping every second bullet point?

You may find that for the most part, the answer to that question is yes, though there are one or two specific points that are still necessary. Is your incidental action too big a deal, too detailed in description?

If you can't cut content to get the length down, the answer is that your target is unrealistic for everything you want the passage to do - so either look at simplifying its task within the overall plot, or reassess your target. Either edit or replace what you've just written if the target's not at fault. ***Back to the start of this phase for you, I'm afraid.***

- **More than 3 x Target:** Too much, *and* your targets need reassessment. Cut or simplify as above, reassess, then redo.

This step of the process can be a little trickier when it comes to an RPG because at least part of the relative significance is attached by the players and what they will have their characters react to. The best solution is to have a minimalist narrative passage with additional details available for anything the the players decide to investigate more closely or interact with, again using bullet points and indexing key terms as shown earlier.

This poses an additional danger that your writing needs to accommodate: you can fall into the trap of sequence, of leaving something out because it's covered in an earlier bullet point or narrative sub-section. My solution to this problem is to deliberately write these narrative in a different order and then re-sequence them into a different order to make sure that they still make sense. I will permit redundancy in such narrative sub-sections but enclose any redundancy in square brackets [like this] so that I know I only have to use it the first time. This ensures that delivery of the information can be discontinuous. Another key technique employed is to make sure there is a list - nested as necessary - of the things that the players *might* focus on incorporated in natural progression.

36. Breakpoint 4

You achieve a lot in this stage of the process, and definitely need to clear your head afterwards - or move on to performing stage 4 for the next block of text, and take a break when you've finished with this process.

Some people use one of these approaches, others use the second. I used to swear by the notion of outlining the whole document in chunks (step 1, then repeat steps 2 and 3 until the whole is bullet-pointed, then perform stage 4 until finished, then move on to stages 5+; I employed that for writing a short story every day, and still employ that approach to writing these blog posts.

But for anything longer than a single blog post, this is a dangerous approach. The risks are two-fold: first, you run the risk of diverting yourself down some literary cul-de-sac, or getting too caught up in discussing some side-issue; second, everyone employs a mental shorthand when creating their bullet points, and you run the risk of forgetting exactly what you meant by one.

Both of these have bitten me on the tail more often than I would like. The longer a planned work (page count), the greater the risk of it happening. If any breaks in the writing process are even marginally possible, the risks escalate both severely and rapidly. So it's no longer my recommended approach for anything of more substance than a single blog post, of more length than 10-12 pages.

For anything of such length, I use a different work-flow organization - I developed it for my Orcs & Elves series, based on lessons learned during the writing of Assassin's Amulet, and employed it in writing this series:

- ◆ Bullet-point breakdown to determine major sections.
- ◆ Synthesize each major section.
- ◆ Bullet-point each major section into sub-sections only as you come to it.
- ◆ Detailed bullet-point only what you expect to write before the next break of 24 hours or more.
- ◆ Write each such sub-section before you bullet-point the next. [Make any notes needed relating to future major sections as you go, attaching them to the synopsis.]
- ◆ Revise and edit each major section as an independent part of the whole.
- ◆ Revise and edit the whole when everything is written.

However you organize the overall writing process, when you stop writing, it's important to take a break before commencing the revision stages.

Sidebar: The unexpected benefit of Collaboration

It's worth noting that this mimics an essential aspect of the process of collaboration. An effective collaboration requires communication between the different contributors and that starts with listing and then synthesizing each proposed component of the whole so that each knows what they are responsible for delivering, then checking each actual contribution to be sure that it actually delivers on those promises. If the logic of each section is clear to another contributor, it will also be clear to the reader. And so on.

Stage 5: Narrative First Review:

How many times should you review what you have written? The answer varies, but when it comes to narrative, the short answer is more times than you think necessary.

Actually, scratch that: No matter what you're writing, the short answer is more times than you think necessary!

The reason is that each review should focus on different aspects and attributes required of the whole. I have specified two review *stages* and one final polish phase in this process. But between them, these contain no less than five revisions, and the only reason why there aren't more review stages is because some of these revisions are mutually compatible and conducive to being conducted at the same time.

The writing stage is about creating narrative flow. The first review stage verifies that the results contain all the actual content required - and no more than can be reasonably accommodated.

37. Reality Check: Re-read and Review

The first step within this stage is really simple - read what you've written, from start to finish. Put a cross or something on every part that isn't clear. Don't worry too much about waffling on at this point; compression comes in a later stage.

You want to minimize any interruption to your reading of the text. If there was a way to note sections that need revision without interrupting your reading at all, I'd take it - but that's unrealistic.

If this is done too soon after your writing, there is too much danger of reading what you *meant* to say or what you *thought* you had said instead of what you *actually* wrote. It's a relatively common mistake: the eye skims over the text, picking up a phrase here and there, and the mind assumes that everything that's supposed to be in between actually *is* where it's supposed to be, filling in the bits in between.

Many writer's guides recommend at least 24 hours to clear your head of the preconceptions that lead to this mistake. I find that a shorter period works, especially if you use a little trick that I discovered by accident: changing the window size or the font. Either causes the text to re-flow, so that assumed patterns don't register, though some gap is still required.

38. Reality Check: Visualization

Having read it through once, and noted obvious problem areas, the next step is to identify the problems and give a more robust examination to the parts that passed the first test. In this test, the goal is to take the words as written and try to visualize the description. Again, this is not possible if there has been insufficient interval between the writing and the review because the original visualization that you built up will still be too fresh in your mind.

There are two things that can be done to aid the process. The first is to have someone other than the author perform these tests. This nullifies any possibility of preconceptions getting in the way. The second trick is to work on a number of different narrative passages before you review any of them; the details of one will be clouded by the more recent memories of another, and hence so will those preconceptions. But this trick is not as effective as the text-re-flow technique mentioned above, and neither is as effective as a more substantial interval.

All that being said, if you are a careful reader, there are advantages to taking a shorter break.

39. Revision 1: Visualization and Clarity

Once the problem areas, in terms of visual coherence and clarity, have been identified, it's time to fix them. This may involve replacing part of a sentence or it may mean replacing the entire section of narrative, or anything in between.

Read the specific part with the problem, identify the specific nature of the problem, and work out what specifically needs to be replaced, redone, or amended to correct that problem.

Once you think the problem has been corrected, read the passage together with those immediately before and after it to ensure that no flow problems have been introduced. If they have, your solution is not good enough; try again.

If it passes that test, review any later text that relates to the specific narrative change that you have introduced to be sure that you have not introduced an inconsistency or continuity error - the equivalent of a phone jumping from one side of a desk in one scene to the other in a later scene, or something being held in the left hand and then the right. These crop up in movies frequently and in TV all the time, even though they are usually fixed when noticed. Production schedules don't allow enough time to spot them all, never mind fix them all - and most productions employ one or more people specifically to watch for such things.

You have an unlimited time budget (the base assumption of this process), so you have no such excuse. And trust me, people *will* notice if you don't.

Taking a shorter break and more care in the review process can pay off big time at this point, because the original visualization is still relatively recent in mind and can be used as a guide to your clarification text. If you are the type of reader who can force themselves to read every word as written, rather than skimming through, take advantage of the fact; not many can do so with sufficient reliability.

40. Breakpoint 5

I recommend a break at this point, but this is probably the least important break of them all. The reason is that your next set of reviews will be looking for something else completely, so all you really need to do is ensure that you can maintain your focus during the next stage of the process. Ten minutes is frequently ample *unless* you are tired out from lots of revisions.

As a rule of thumb, assume that stage six will take twice as long as stage 5 did to complete. So if you've spent two hours on the first review, ask yourself if you can concentrate for another four hours. If you've spent five hours on the first review, can you work for ten hours with minimal breaks? Most people would say yes to the first (depending on the time of day) and no to the second, unless they absolutely had to do it.

Stage 6: Second Review:

The purpose of the second review is to compress your text to a reasonable length. This is best done working on one passage at a time, copying and pasting a copy of each passage as you go. My technique is to change the font color of the whole document to something else - usually blue - then select a passage of text, copy it, change the color of the selected passage back to black, then paste the copied text just below it; with most word processors, it will retain the color of the original. If that's not available as an approach, you will need to find some other means of distinguishing working copy from original.

There are two reasons for this approach: first, it permits you to scrap your work on a passage and start over; and second, it saves the need to retype *everything*. Actually, there's a third reason, but I'll get to that in a little while.

41. Revision 2: Compression:

Step 41 of this writing process (I know! *Forty-one!* it seems never-ending...) is to attempt to rewrite what you have so that it takes only half as many words (judged by the rough standard of number of lines). With most narrative text, without having taken special efforts to eliminate redundancy, this is usually achievable - barely.

Since we have already taken those special efforts to eliminate the soft targets, it should be extremely difficult if not impossible to get down to that length without cutting text. So, as judiciously as possible, that's what you have to do to try and get the word-count down.

- ◆ Can two sentences become one at the price of only a few added words?
- ◆ Can you trim an adjective here and an unnecessary detail there?
- ◆ Can you rely more heavily on the broad beginning statement that sets the tone for the entire narrative passage, perhaps padded ever so slightly?
- ◆ Can you find a more expressive term to replace a noun that implies any adjective currently attached to the noun?

Trim and cut until it bleeds. Look for wasteful words and phrases like "and" and "but" and "although" and "except". If you have a sentence of the format [description clause] [listed word] [further description], there is almost always a way to rephrase the first description clause such that the listed word and the further description that follows it can be eliminated.

I have seen it suggested that the more experience a writer has, the harder it will be to achieve such targets, because they will naturally compress as they write. To some extent, this is true, but the more experienced the writer, the more time they have had to develop bad habits (especially if primarily self-edited) - which easily compensates. Experience just means that larger chunks can get taken out.

42. Reality Check: Re-read and Review 2

Once the bloodletting (ink-letting?) is done, it's time to re-read and review the end product. Are things still clear? Has anything been cut out that you *really* want or need to include? What's satisfactory, and what's now too sparse in description?

As I noted in the previous step, if it weren't for the redundancy weeding, the half-words target would be achievable, if just barely - but the easy targets were already eliminated. The fact that we're working on a line-count gives a little wriggle room, but not much; in order to get anywhere close to the target, you usually have to cut too far.

This review is to identify where something needs to be put back.

43. Revision 3: Blend to the break-point

The next step is to copy and paste from the original, longer version into the too-short version until an acceptable balance is achieved. At the same time, review the bullet-point list; anything that doesn't get described in the integrated version should get cut-and-pasted to join the other deferred material at the bottom of the list, available for use as color and micro-setting detail in action and dialogue scenes.

44. Breakpoint 6

Let's be honest: this is a lot harder than writing the first draft. That's why, even though some of the compressed material will be fine, I suggested allowing a lot of time for this stage. This is where all that agonizing over this word or that happens, all that sweat of trying alternative formulations and phrasings in search of the one that expresses the description, *and* does it succinctly, *and* doesn't break the narrative flow, *and* is accessible to the anticipated readers / players. For any serious length of text, you finish this stage absolutely worn out, mentally exhausted - because if you aren't, you probably aren't trying hard enough.

You *definitely* need a break afterwards. At least 24 hours *not* spent doing second revision. Get some rest, then work on a different passage of text that is currently in a completely different stage of development; engage some different mental muscles.

Stage 7: Final Polish:

By now, most of the text is in pretty good shape. It's time for nit-picking and nuance and one last check that you haven't shot yourself in the pen somewhere along the way - for the final polish, in other words.

45. Revision 4: Nuanced Synonyms

The starting point is to consider each of the terms used in your narrative and actively think about possible synonyms that may be more expressive. In particular, this applies to any subsection of the narrative that wasn't subject to intense scrutiny in the course of Stage 6.

46. Reality Check: Re-read and Review 3

Once that's done, it's time to re-read it again, trying to get an overall impression. Good, bad, too frilly or flowery, too weak, too strong, too direct... the possibilities are almost endless. Clarity, vividness, flow, voice, and style are the things you're looking for. In particular, you are concerned with the emotional intensity being conveyed and whether it is of the correct tone and intensity.

47. Reality Check: Vividness & Excitement

And, as usual, once you've identified the problem areas with a relatively-uninterrupted read-through, it's time to go through it again and work out exactly what the problems are, ready to solve them. While you're at it, check on the levels of vividness and excitement that you are incorporating. Exclamation marks are easy to over-use!!

Add these to the sub-sections to be revised, with appropriate notes.

48. Revision 5: Flow, Visualization and Clarity

Make the revisions and corrections you've noted in steps 46 and 47, always with the goal of fixing the problems without breaking the things you've been writing to achieve so far- flow, visualization, and clarity. This is also the time to bear in mind that the narrative passage will have to be clear enough that its afterimage, reinforced with tidbits from the deferred bullet list, will have to remain clear despite the distractions of whatever is to follow the narrative passage.

While a little fuzziness can help in creating a gestalt impression from the compounding of words, it can also make the narrative too weak for that impression to survive. It often helps to provide a concrete detail or two from the deferred list - even if it's something you'd cut earlier - by providing a focal point for the impression to hang from. You only need one, somewhere close to the end of the narrative passage, if you don't have some present already.

49. Repeat Stage 6 as necessary

It would be great if this only had to be done once. For most passages in a work of fiction, that may well be the case. But there will usually be something that needs greater attention because the changes have broken one of the many objectives you have for this piece of writing: Narrative flow, vividness, clarity, tone, intensity, and accessibility - and conveying the actual content of the scene. Once you have made a change, re-read the passage from the subsection before through the one that follows and verify that everything still works the way it should. If it doesn't, scrap the changes to that subsection or sentence and try again.

You can find at this stage that you have fixed something that wasn't actually broken, while failing to fix what was. Non-writers would be astonished at how frequently that happens; it's a manifestation of being unable to see the forest for the trees.

50. Breakpoint 7

There are - or should be - fewer passages that need revision within phase seven, but the ones that do need further work are generally the most difficult to work with. This is especially true if you're trying to subliminally hint at something more than is obvious, which adds a whole new layer of difficulty. Is the narrative supposed to capture a metaphor for something? Does it do so? Does it represent a metaphor when it isn't supposed to? While this stage should take about the same length of time as stage 5, it is easily as intense as stage 6. Afterwards, you need a break.

Stage 8: Completion:

The final steps deal with clean-up and compilation.

51. Aggregate working

The first thing to do is to aggregate all the working that you've done so that it's available for later use. In particular, you want the bullet points and finished text together so that you can refer to both when working on later passages of text. It does no good to establish a staircase in the initial description and then have people trapped later on without mentioning - and explicitly dismissing as an exit - that staircase. There will be action sequences and dialogue and narrative descriptions of people, and this compilation is your notes on where they will be and what parts of their environment they can be interacting with while those things are happening.

52. Index the aggregate

I showed this in the law office example at the start of part 1, at least in part. I number the draft paragraphs by draft number and paragraph number and put a list of them at the end of the document where it will be out of the way, make any notes on color coding, and so on. This is so that you can find whatever you need to from your working if you later need it.

There was a time when I would have suggested including features in your narrative simply to provide something to react dramatically to whatever the action sequence was. A shop-front sign, a billboard, a glass fish-tank, whatever - I made sure that it was specified in the final description so that it was at the ready to demonstrate catastrophic damage later on.

This approach sometimes works just fine; but if, for whatever reason, your action sequence and the chosen object don't correctly interact, if the sequence evolves or changes before it's finished, you can be left with the extraneous and superfluous detail contributing nothing.

So these days I advocate leaving such details in an accessible format - the bullet list - until you write the action sequence, and if it turns out that you need it, you can go back and prepare the ground for the action sequence by inserting mention of that narrative element in the appropriate place.

53. Archive the aggregate

Once you've got the aggregate ready to use, file it away until you need it again - someplace where it will be safe. How would you feel if, after months of solid work, you were in the final stages of creating an adventure or a book and there was a computer crash in the middle of saving the document, corrupting it? It's happened to me!

Hopefully, you would have a backup, and hopefully that backup would be accessible (unlike most of the backups that I used to make with WinXP's basic backup software - something discovered the hard way).

Okay, let's consider a more likely scenario: you have your description done, and three chapters later, you have something else happen at the same location. Obviously, you want access to the master description of the location without having to search the whole document for it. Equally obviously you don't want to simply repeat the same description that you gave the first time around, and there will be some differences from that appearance anyway - different things should be prominent if only because the characters have already been there once. Throw in all the differences in emotional tone and intensity and it's a lot easier to go back to an earlier draft, copy-and-paste it, and then develop it through stages 5, 6, and 7 to achieve these different goals.

54. Replace placeholders in master with final draft

Next, copy the final version from the archive and insert it into the appropriate location in the master document. As soon as you have done that and saved it, your text is "official" and you're ready to move on!

55. Archive master checklists

Finally, put away any checklists that you may have used, and make permanent copies of the blank version of any new checklists that you may have put together so that *they* can be used again.

56. Done! For Now

This process doesn't try to do too much at once. It's a lot of small steps, and as both Marco Pierre White and Ray Lewis have noted, quoting Fernand Point's [Ma Gastronomie](#), "Perfection is many small things done well" (though Lewis may not have known the source).

Chapter 4: The Impact Of Polished Text

Having spent most of this book focusing on how to produce better narrative, it's time to look at the implications and consequences of employing such narrative in an RPG setting.

The effect on player thinking

There are a number of effects that can be anticipated as a result of better crafted narrative when employed in an RPG context. I've divided these into three broad categories: The Effects on Players, Other positive effects, and the downsides.

Blurring the focus on spoilers

Poorly-crafted narrative either focuses on the significant before it is recognized by the readers/players as significant, telegraphing where they should place their attention, or it overwhelms with massive blocks of prose that swims with unnecessary detail in an attempt to conceal what's significant amongst what is not. Neither is all that desirable. Far better for the players and characters to interact with their environment, assessing the significance of each element in turn, and leaving it up to them to decide what's significant.

By providing a simple snapshot that cues areas or subjects for further investigation, well-crafted narrative eliminates the telegraphing without the problems of drowning it in detail. That in turn has two consequent effects: the adventures that the GM runs will be better and more interactive and richer, and he no longer needs to spend time either planning for the telegraphing of his plot cues or coming up with that swarm of details.

Make no mistake: the process of creating better narrative described may be lengthy and involved, but it is still a lot faster (especially with a little practice) than spending hours detailing the woodgraining here and the leather there. If a room contains 20 objects (and the room I'm in at as I write has far more than that), consider spending 20 minutes or so on each - 400 minutes - compared to touching generally on the four or five most significant and then spending an hour each crafting exceptional narrative for those four for a total of perhaps 250 minutes - less if you cut corners. That's more than 2 hours prep time saved, at least.

It actually can take more time to craft bad narrative than good. That's because with good narrative, you have a reason for everything that is included being there, and can use that logic as a guide to what to spend time on.

The result is that the players can be both more aware of and engaged in their immediate environment, while still getting the full benefit of rich detail when it matters or is useful.

The capacity to forget a detail

The alternative to being too obvious is to drown the players in details, as mentioned. Burying the important details makes them less obvious, to be sure, but it also encourages players to forget one or more items of significance. This can slow a plot or even bring it to a shuddering halt, or create ill-will between players and GM - "I wouldn't have done [x] if I had known about [y]" rears its head once again.

The GM's job, in terms of narrative, is to communicate effectively to the players what is around them, and then get out of the way of the plot. Doing so not only uses less game-time than the alternative - a point I'll come to in a moment in more detail - but it reinvests some that time in additional play.

Although it won't happen right away, as players get used to a higher quality of narrative, and grow accustomed to being certain that everything of significance has been brought to their attention *sufficiently for further investigation*, so they will grow in confidence in their interactions with the environment, and will place greater confidence in the GM's neutrality. That's a lot of benefit, but it doesn't stop there.

The integration of situational awareness

Greater situational awareness can't help but result from making the salient details more accessible to the players. That, in turn, makes the players more aware of the plot and more capable of interacting with it. This tends to derail any plot trains, forcing the GM to further improve his plot structures. Ultimately, the results are that plots become richer and deeper, while remaining accessible to the players. In other words, better storytelling by the combined whole, the collaboration between players and GM.

Immersion

Greater awareness of their surroundings, richer plots, and more substantial interaction with their environment can be summed up as greater immersion in the game. That, in turn, brings other benefits - the game itself becomes more vibrant, alive, and responsive to the style of play that the players want. The game becomes more vibrant and at the same time more fun for the players. If the GM is able to cope with the demands that this places upon his skills and abilities, it becomes more fun for him too - not a bad return for less work on his part.

Consistency

I'm closing the discussion of the impact on player mentality with an entry that is six of one and half-a-dozen of the other - consistency. Better narrative structures presents the players with greater capacity for consistency of characterization, as expressed through their roleplay and choices of actions. That's the plus-side of the ledger.

However, it requires greater effort on the players' side of the table for this to be achieved, so this capacity - if misused - can actually be detrimental to the game, as I'll discuss in The Downsides in a little bit.

Other benefits

Beyond the impacts on the players, there are a number of other effects that can be expected from improving the narrative employed in the game.

Maximizing play time

There is a direct correlation between the amount of prep time beyond the necessary and the amount of wasted play time at the table. For example, drowning the players in detail not only consumes more prep time but it takes up more time at the game table. Both can be considered wasted time. Some of these savings are reinvested, as noted earlier, in greater interaction between the PCs and the game world, but even without counting that, less time wasted at the table still increases the amount of play that is achieved in any game session.

Better mental mapping of situations

Better narrative not only helps the players grasp what is going on, it helps the GM keep track of what is going on. This is of obvious benefit to both sides, which only amplifies all the other benefits mentioned so far.

In general, any prep time invested in doing *better* instead of doing *more* yields secondary benefits that more than justify the effort, provided that enough material is prepared to cover the anticipated game needs. This is a key consideration in prioritization of prep as outlined in [Fire Fighting, Systems Analysis, and RPG Problem Solving Part 2 of 3: Prioritization](#), which focuses on first, achieving the minimum work needed, and then secondly, prioritization based on the expected yield in improvement of the game as played, taking into account the individual abilities of the GM doing the prep.

Better situational awareness on the part of the GM results in better game calls when he needs to adjudicate the results of PC actions, with fewer disputed calls (nothing will eliminate them altogether). And that yields a further return in reduction of wasted time at the game table, happier players, and a happier GM.

More appropriate interactions with environment

Better awareness of the circumstances on both sides also means that there will be less likelihood of stupid choices on the part of the players; these usually result from player frustration, and by minimizing the causes of that frustration, you improve the quality of player choices. That, in turn, means that the GM is able to use the combination of better awareness and better choices of action to adjudicate to produce better responses, which yields further improvements in player interaction with their environment. It's a feedback loop of improvement in the game, and in the player's appreciation of the quality of GMing.

More appropriate interactions with NPCs

Better descriptions of an environment leave the players with greater capacity for relating to NPCs and makes it easier for the GM to make the NPCs appropriate to the environment. This is another win-win for both sides, and - as shown previously - leads to further benefits. A better environment and better descriptions of NPCs leads to better NPCs and better interactions between PCs and NPCs.

These benefits come about in four ways:

- ◆ It becomes easier for the GM to keep the environment and other game/plot requirements in mind when crafting the NPCs because better narrative descriptions make the overall situation more accessible to him or her. This results in better NPC characterization choices;
- ◆ Better characterization leads to character descriptions reflecting more closely the character of the NPC;
- ◆ Better character descriptions that reflect the personality of the NPC make the characterization more accessible to the players;
- ◆ Better characterization leads to better dialogue, which is the primary means of exposing NPC characterization to the players.

All of these in combination can only produce better, more individual NPCs and more individualized interactions between players and NPCs - better roleplay, in other words.

Better roleplay through immersion

Finally, with the immersion of both sides of the table being improved through the mechanisms described above, better roleplay can only result from the reduction of distraction by both sides. It's as though everyone at the table decided to make a greater effort to roleplay well at the same time.

The Downsides

That's a powerful truckload of benefit to the game. Most people tend to under-rate the benefits from better narrative, from working "smarter" not "harder". But it does come at a price, and that side of the ledger needs to be examined as well.

GM Time

At least at first, while the GM is learning how to craft better narrative, he can expect to be less productive. How quickly the benefits begin to materialize away from the game table will vary from individual to individual, but it is unlikely to be immediate. For a while, then, an increase in the demands on a GM's time can be expected. If you are already stretched to the limit, that can be a real problem.

It's a hurdle that can be managed, however. Choosing a simpler plot with fewer time requirements - the sort of thing you might do if you were anticipating a temporary reduction in the amount of prep time that you have - can free up enough prep time to enable the transition to happen, and is probably the simplest solution.

Wasted Prep

Until you get the hang of the process and it comes naturally to you - which may take 3 weeks, 3 months, or a year, depending on how ingrained old habits are - you can expect to go down a few blind alleys, make a few mistakes, and - in general - have more wasted prep. This can be frustrating to the GM and even cause him to give up on the process before the benefits start to flow. Being forewarned - and allowing a little extra GM prep time - mitigates this problem.

In particular, it will take time for the players to get used to the new approach, especially if they are used to being spoon-fed the next plot hook. They may also grow frustrated, and this can add to the pressure on the GM to give up on the process of improving their narratives, or set it aside for use in a less-immediate context - something to use when prepping an adventure for publication somewhere, for example, but not during their day-to-day, week-to-week game prep.

Again, being aware of the problem and being prepared to lead your players through the process by hand can mitigate these negative impacts. Provided that the GM remains convinced that the end result will justify the short-term problems, he can usually convince the players; it is for that reason that I have spent quite a lot of time "selling" the benefits earlier. Above all, he should resist any urges to give the players what they want if they are resisting the changes. This sacrifices all the gains that can be achieved in return for some short-term relief.

GM inflexibility

GMs who aren't used to the flexibility that this approach yields to the players are likely to struggle with it, at least at first, opening up a third front on which problems can manifest. Some GMs respond by becoming more inflexible in an effort to restrict player choices to a more manageable range. It's very easy to fall into this trap because you can often get away with it for quite a long time without the players recognizing what is happening because the options presented include the one that they would opt for anyway, and it makes life for the GM much easier. Inevitably, eventually one of the PCs will attempt to go off-script, and that's when things fall apart spectacularly. Even seasoned GMs have to relearn this lesson periodically.

GM inflexibility attempts to mitigate the problems already noted by reducing the prep and in-game workload of the GM, but this is the wrong approach to take. Virtually all the benefits mentioned earlier are predicated on giving the players greater flexibility to interact with the game world and NPCs; this approach eases the pain of implementation of the process by sacrificing the bulk of the benefit, making it much easier to decide that the effort is not producing any real benefit and should be abandoned.

And that assessment completely ignores the potential fallout when the wheels come off, and the players insist on doing something other than the options allowed by the GM.

Plot Railroading

The other aspect of the inflexibility response is that it tends to lead to plot railroading, or to be seen as tantamount to plot railroading. Players hate this far more than GMs do; they want to be in command of their characters at all times, and to have free choice of what their PCs do, even if it makes no sense.

Even the structural outline of the law-office example I prepared earlier shows some tendencies in this direction, simply by presuming how the PCs will respond to the receptionist and that they will be cooperative within the scene. Just because there is no reason to expect the PCs to deviate from this "script" does not mean that they won't.

In this case, the tendency is actually an illusion, resulting from deliberately linking one scene (encounter with the receptionist) to another (encounter with the secretary) to another (encounter between the two secretaries) en route to the meeting room in order to show the way in which past narrative remains in effect even though the action itself has moved on. In reality, these should be separated into separate encounters so that if the PCs choose a response other than that expected, the GM can accommodate it.

Writer's Block

One of the ongoing prices that has to be paid for better narrative is an increased susceptibility to writer's block. By separating out the brainstorming of ideas (part of the bullet-listing stage) and the organization of ideas and conversion into functional narrative, the process tries to mitigate against the problem, but it can't fully eliminate it. If you find yourself in trouble with writer's block, I advise you to refer to my series on the subject, [Breaking Through Writer's Block](#).

Many writers come to anticipate losing X percent of their time to writer's block and build in sufficient cushion to ensure they still meet deadlines. After all, if you finish early, there's always something else you can spend time doing! This is the approach that I recommend.

Other writers tend to assume that writer's block won't hinder them because it usually doesn't, and that the adventure will only proceed as far as they have prepared when play begins, anyway. I can't argue too loudly against this approach, because I'm guilty of it myself most of the time - I rarely write articles for Campaign Mastery until the day they are to be published, for example. That means that I'm fairly confident of my ability to overcome any writer's block; occasionally, I have a close shave with the deadline, but that's as bad as it gets. If this is your preferred approach, I can only wish you luck.

It's too much like work

When you're used to writing as fast as the ideas can flow, the process described can seem profoundly hard work that `sucks all the fun out of game prep, replacing it with metaphoric sweat and toil. This is actually the result of being undisciplined in your approach to game prep; the "lack of fun" or "stifling of creativity" are actually a reaction to being forced to adjust to the more disciplined approach that this process requires.

In other words, this is another short-term problem that may be faced. Once you are used to the technique, you will become adept at dropping in additional bullet points and reminders to self regarding future parts of the prep as you write, and will find that you can be just as creative while still delivering the better results.

Game prep is *always* work, but often-times the pleasure of being creative and imaginative masks this fact. Changing your technique can strip that mask away for a while. As long as you have been forewarned, you can put up with the phenomenon for as long as it lasts.

Inconsistency

I noted earlier that consistency was one benefit that could result from better narrative because it gives the players greater opportunity for self-expression through the choices they make for both themselves and the PCs that they play. It is, however, equally possible for characters to be expressed more inconsistently as a result of the greater freedom afforded to players. It can become much harder to predict how characters will respond to a given situation, which makes the job of adventure creation harder for the GM, and can lead to GM inflexibility in response.

There's not a lot that the GM can do about this. The best answer involves a deeper understanding and definition of the personality profiles of the PCs generated by the player and subsequently communicated to the GM, but even that is only a partial solution. No matter how tempting it may be, resist any urge to force a player to justify his character's choices in terms of his personality or mindset; it can only end badly. The farthest that a GM should go is telling the player (after the game) that he doesn't understand why his character made those choices.

It's actually relatively common for this to turn out to be a result of incorrect dramatic emphasis within the GM's narrative, making something seem more important than it actually is, frequently on an earlier occasion to the actual manifestation of the problem. More often than not, inconsistency of play is the result of inconsistency of narrative when viewed as a whole, progressing from start to finish of the adventure.

Relative Importance To The Scene

One of the advantages of the process provided here (as opposed to other approaches to "better writing" that I've seen) is that it defines more clearly a relative importance to the contents of the scene, by stripping out the details of those elements that do and don't matter equally, then putting the significance back only in response to PC interaction with the narrative elements.

I'm afraid that I'm not explaining this very clearly, so let me try an alternative phrasing by quoting something Hungry at [Ravenous Role Playing](#) had to say about one of the posts that this book compiles. He wrote, "*Players love to think (I think it's an ingrained human condition), 'Oh! The blue book was mentioned on the shelf, but none of the others were detailed, so that blue book must be the important thing in the room, so I'm going to grab the blue book and see what's in it as soon as I can!'*" This is a perfect example of what I had in mind when I talked about bad narrative telegraphing the next step in the plot.

This process removes that problem by not detailing any of the contents of the room until they are closely examined by the PCs - just listing them in a very general way: "The books on the bookshelves suggest that the resident is well-educated," for example. However, the strength of language employed can still lead to a relative indication of significance, and this can cause inconsistency when the wrong thing receives unwarranted emphasis. This can result simply from seeing something more clearly in your mind when writing it, or because a particular turn of phrase came to mind.

Two Ways this can manifest

It's bitten me in the past, when I have presented two problems to the PCs - one that is intended to restrict the possible solutions to the second by imposing additional consequences to most of those solutions - and they have decided that this means that the restricting problem is the more important one, the one that needs their immediate attention. Which is a perfect example of GM inflexibility leading to inconsistency of characterization. Instead of the problem that was supposed to matter taking front and center, the language employed caused a misdirection of player focus, and a wasted hour of discussion/investigation on the part of the players.

The other way that this manifests is when players are playing to the plot and not playing to the personality of their characters. "My character is more inclined to focus on problem X, but if I do that, problem Y will get out of hand. I should deal with the immediate plot problem first because it makes sense to do so in terms of the plot and not indulge my character's personal preferences." This becomes a problem when problem X is only part of the plot *because* of the character's expected reaction to it, and that the solution is supposed to give key information needed in order to solve the other problem.

This can be restated as a problem in character prioritization of the problems being presented to them by the GM, resulting in an inconsistency of characterization; but players prioritize based on the information the GM gives them, and especially the dramatic strength of the narrative used to describe the circumstances. In other words, this is the GM's fault. If you want a PC to take one problem as more serious than the other, load your words accordingly when describing it to the players.

The Reality of Sandboxing & Other GMing philosophies

Sandboxing and other such approaches to the art of GMing all aim to restrict or better-target the subjects of GM prep, enabling the benefits of limited prep time to be maximized, while minimizing downsides and excess. The key word there is *target*.

At first, it can appear that these philosophies are incompatible with the process detailed herein because they emphasize detailed preparation and then extracting the relevant details for further development. Further reflection will show that this is not the case, however; the process I have outlined is based on the approach of defining a general context and then only developing the resulting elements that are relevant to the expected adventure and its constituents.

Sandboxing is effectively built into the process. The only compromise is in defining that overall context before you start, thereby avoiding one of the great pitfalls of the pure sand-boxing approach - trying to create that context after the fact when the action moves beyond the area immediately detailed.

This compromise represents an overhead on the pure sand-boxing approach, but one that is an investment in the future of the campaign. Subsequent development will flow all the more easily for having that general context defined in advance.

Modifying the process for RPG needs

RPGs are a little different from other forms of text that require narrative. To some extent, these differences are already accommodated within the process, simply adding a new type of Passage (player decision points) to the list provided at the beginning, while modifying the content and structure of some of the others (context passages, location passages, and action passages). The requirement is still to prepare the narrative passage in such a way that it leads to one of the others. The only thing that really changes is the sequence with which different passages take place, which is dictated by a force external to the writer, i.e. the players.

In general, the basic structure of a narrative block remains the same: a general impression, content, and the trigger for a form of interaction between players and plot.

It is not all that difficult to modify the process accordingly. In fact, because it reduces the need for a seamless flow from one passage to the next by creating discontinuities and independent passages, writing better narrative for an RPG is actually easier in a lot of ways. Furthermore, less polish is typically required, because the GM can incorporate additional details as required, if necessary, inventing them on the spot.

It starts with the planning of the adventure.

Planning the adventure

A synopsis of what the adventure is about is the perfect starting point. This synopsis should not rely on any player decisions that have not already been made; it is far better to frame it in terms of what one or more NPCs are doing to create the situation that the PCs have to resolve.

The next step is to identify all the key locations and all the key NPCs.

Next step: map out a flow between inevitable sections of the plot, in the most general terms. This breaks the adventure down into sections that have to happen, regardless of the outcome of any individual events or encounters within; they are the logical building blocks of the overall plot. The goal is to synopsise the circumstances with which the PCs will be presented in the course of each of the major section.

Finally, identify from the above any inevitable set scenes that will occur. These typically include introductions to the key NPCs.

Define the locations

If these have appeared before, the details can be recycled from that earlier appearance. For those which have not, produce an overview of each, which will form the general impression of the location. You don't want specific details, just a general concept.

Define the NPCs

Once again, if any have appeared before, the details can be recycled from that earlier appearance. For the rest, a general idea of their appearance and personality is all that's needed at this point.

Breakdown The Acts

Bullet-point brainstorm the overall structure of the plot in each of the major sections, where it will take place, and who will be involved (from an NPC point of view). This is your list of scenes within each act.

Breakdown each location

Bullet-point brainstorm the descriptions of each of the locations you've identified, based on the guideline that you have already created.

Create the NPCs

Develop the personalities, histories, etc, of the NPCs, using your preferred approach, then synopsise that into a set of bullet points.

Narrative sections: Locations

List the narrative sections that apply to each location. In the case of the law firm example, this would be 1. reception; 2. secretarial/offices; 3. other locations en route to meeting room; and 4. meeting room.

Organize your bullet-points into each of these narrative sections. Duplicate as necessary.

Write the overall narrative passage for each section, and immediately after writing each, perform the first and second review phases in one step. In other words, edit bullet-list, flow, draft, clarify, compress, review, next section. *Delete each bullet point as it is incorporated into the narrative.* Append any remainder to the narrative as a bullet list.

Narrative sections: NPC Set-scenes

Use the combination of where they are occurring and the NPC bullet points to craft an introduction to each using the same steps outlined above: edit bullet-list, flow, draft, clarify, compress, review, next. Once again, delete each bullet point as it is incorporated into the narrative and append any remainder to the narrative as a bullet-list.

After each, make sure to note the NPCs objectives within the scene and how they intend to achieve them.

Narrative: Other Set Scenes

Bullet-point and then write narrative for any scenes in which the players will witness action but not be able to intervene.

Connect the dots

You now know where events are to occur, who is going to be involved, and what the basic events are. This step involves filling in the blanks, writing any canned dialogue, and so on. In particular, you need to note how each scene is supposed to lead to the next.

Final review

Once it's all written, read the whole thing from start to finish, performing stages 7 & 8 and correcting/clarifying as you go.

Other prep

You can then move on to any other prep you think necessary or desirable, indexing them into the main text as you go. If you produce a map, for example, make a note of the map at the appropriate location description.

Adventure Done!

As quickly as that, the adventure is done. You have only general indications of how each scene will work out, based on the personalities and objectives of the NPCs involved, but you have everything you need in order to referee the adventure.

The typical adventure will have about half-a-dozen broad locations, with up to four areas detailed for each. A larger one may have more, a smaller one may have less. Similarly, most adventures will involve half-a-dozen or so major NPCs and potentially many more minor ones who have not been fully developed. (Use [The Ubercharacter Wimp](#) and [The Flunkie Equation](#) as tools). Instead of one large writing job, this turns the adventure into thirty or so smaller, more discrete, ones. It leaves all the details that you didn't think you'd need available for use if the occasion merits it, but only turns into narrative the parts that you will definitely want to read to the players.

Each part should take 5 minutes *at most* to write - so that's 150 minutes, or about 2 1/2 hours of prep. Figure maybe ten minutes brainstorming for each of the major locations, and about 10 minutes each for nine or so other narrative blocks, and that's roughly another 2 1/2 hours. Throw in an hour for the initial planning, and that's a complete ready-to-play adventure in 6 hours - or in one late night before play. Or an hour a night each night before the weekly game. That time frame is comparable to the time it takes to outline a more traditional adventure, if not less - I speak from experience.

Sure, there's lots more that you *could* do, but that's enough for play. The adventure is complete.

Chapter 5: Pearls Of Spontaneous Prose

In Chapter 4, I examined the impact on an RPG of employing better narrative, and found that the gains were a many-fold return on the time investment. I also looked at the practicalities of learning to create better narrative that people should take into account - in particular, the short-term pain that may cause them to abandon their efforts prematurely because "it's not working".

In this concluding chapter, I aim to focus on the ultimate test of creating good narrative - improvising - before wrapping up the series.

The ability to improv

It's one thing to be able to create an improvised adventure and quite another to deliver it effectively, living by your wits and ability to respond. All your worst vices as a GM are sure to crawl out of the woodwork when you try - simple plots can become hideously over-complicated, for example, or villains can become over-the-top shams of clichéd characterization.

Past articles here at Campaign Mastery have looked at how to create an improvised adventure, how to get yourself out of trouble when improvising, how to generate characters on-the-fly, and so on, but haven't looked all that closely at the implementation of those adventures.

If you take out the creation and roleplaying of NPCs, the creation of a plotline, and adjudicating of PC actions, there isn't a whole lot to GMing left aside from narrative creation and delivery: what's happening, where, and what it all looks like to the PCs. So the ability to improv narrative *is* the heart of implementing an improvised adventure.

The process used for creating great narrative can be easily modified to this particular application, but before I get into that, I have some general advice to offer.

Think it through

Guarding against those GMing vices is best achieved by always having a reason for what you do at each step of running an improv adventure. Before you begin a new scene, work out what that scene is to achieve in terms of the overall plotline you've come up with, and at least take a moment to decide whether things should be getting better, getting worse, getting more dramatic, getting more emotional, or winding up for a finish. This is a rough method of creating both a metagame context for the scene and implementing an emotional progression within the overall adventure; both of these things should shape the narrative that you deliver. Don't agonize over things, but do take a handful of seconds to think about things overall.

Think ahead

Having decided why the scene should happen, in the context of the overall adventure, and what its tone should be, the next thing to do is to take a moment - and you only need a second or three - to think about where this scene should go, and how it will connect to the scene that will *probably* follow this one.

You might think that this is completely up to the players, but that's not actually the case - they will respond to the cues you offer them, or they will do something completely unrelated to the adventure you had in mind. If you mention an NPC or a location, they will want to know more about it. If you hint that answers to at least some of their questions may be found at a given place, they will at least contemplate going to that place. If you always know *why* an NPC is doing whatever it is that they are doing in the scene, whether that's offering a roman legionnaire's salute to one of the PCs and addressing him as Emperor in Latin, or tearing up the sidewalk, you will also know how they will respond to whatever the characters do, or at least, how they will *want* to respond.

Polish as you go, not in advance

When improvising an adventure, you have to "live in the now" more than when delivering one that you've prepped for in advance. If you think of a wonderful piece of phrasing that you don't need yet, or a clever twist for later in the adventure, your mind is not where it needs to be - forget it until the time comes, and if you remember it then, great. You do need to keep one eye on the bigger picture, but that's what the preceding suggestions are for. Improv adventures require greater focus on the here-and-now and less on how it's all going to fit together.

In particular, any new ideas that you have need closer examination *before* you implement them. One of my flaws as a GM is the bad habit of coming up with a wonderful idea in the middle of an adventure that completely changes that adventure in direction or outcome, and implementing it before thinking it through. Sometimes these plot twists work, other times they explode catastrophically in my face and require delicate emergency surgery on the adventure to prevent the complete derailing of the campaign.

Also in this category are PC mistakes and player misunderstandings, misapprehensions, and erroneous assumptions. As soon as you get the slightest suspicion that any of these have occurred, figure out how and when events will correct the error - and if they won't do so, and the error threatens to derail the adventure or the campaign, *insert a correction*. When you are playing off-the-cuff, don't let that cuff fray without planning a stop at the tailor!

Canned descriptions

When you're thinking up your improvised adventures, images, scenes, and characters will come to mind. As soon as you are able, jot these down as notes and use them as the basis of descriptions. Two or three minutes so spent at the start of play - and *don't* take longer than that - can save you a heap of grief later. Failing to do so is another of my failings as a GM and it does keep biting me, when a character turns up six or twelve months later, or the players go back to a particular location, and I have *nothing* on which to base the descriptions/action on. I don't care how memorable or iconic you think the notion is - put it in writing. Make additional notes as you go.

Research in Prep

If you know that you aren't going to have any prep time to create an adventure at some future point, spend three-to-five minutes before then on a Google image search, or looking up a wikipedia article. Stock some ideas and visual reference in the back of your mind for when the time comes. It's astonishing how little such activity can be beneficial. You don't even have to look at the full-sized images, just the thumbnails can be useful.

Iconic depictions as foundation

There are locations that are iconic, that we all know from TV and movies. Using these as a starting point and embellishing or transforming the scene in some way can be a great shortcut to the creative process, and it can also help deliver polished narrative simply because you can visualize the setting more clearly when describing it. Don't be afraid to employ such trickery when you need it.

But there is a caveat: don't use iconic places from novels, because your vision or interpretation might be quite different from those of your players. You can be quite clear in your own mind about what you are describing, but they simply can't "see" it, causing frustration to both. Rely on a visual source.

Alliteration? Ahem! Although...

Some sources argue vehemently against the use of alliteration, and - to be fair - it is easily-abused. As a general rule, it's best avoided. However, there are times when it can be used by choice for deliberate effect, as was the case in the title of this post. DON'T use it accidentally. DO use it when it benefits your narrative.

A simple process to improv great narration

The process for improvising great narration is surprisingly simple - the heavy lifting has been done in learning how to write that narrative in the first place.

Flow to bullet-points to narrative

The secret trick is to reverse a couple of stages in the literary process, and do the writing aloud. The full-prep approach was bullet-points to visualization to flow to narrative to polished and compressed narrative. The improve technique is to visualize, work out how to flow the narrative, turn the visualization into mental bullet-points, and then recombine them into narrative.

It's that simple. You go from an overall impression that defines a number of areas for closer description, then uses that impression as the foundation for descriptive elements that fit into that overall impression. The result is often less creative than the full process, but it will be clear and succinct.

Picture it in your mind - what do you see?

I start by identifying one or two key adjectives to describe the overall scene or an iconic image plus original variation to be applied. Examples might be "Futuristic city - domed buildings - made of colored spun glass, delicate and artistic", or "Operating theater, raised operating table angled downward at the feet, Frankenstein's lab fittings, half-built mechanical man on the table."

Entrance and exit

To this visualization I add or identify where the entrances and exits are. It often helps to assume that your visualization is happening from the entrance point, so that it will also be the PC's point of view of the initial scene - but this can also leave you exposed when they enter the scene and look back in the direction from which they came.

Behind you!

So I make sure to spend a moment thinking about what the area behind that point-of-view will look like. "Crumbling Skyscrapers" and "a bank of machines and computers", respectively, would work for the examples.

One Sentence at a time

With those impressions nailed down, I then create and announce the narrative, one sentence at a time. Once you have the visual in your head, if you avoid getting too specific too soon, you can rattle off your narrative almost as fast as you can think of it. Give a general impression that lists areas PCs might want to focus on and that tells them generally what's in the room, and then let them either select something for closer inspection or deal with whatever there is within that space to interact with.

Remember to incorporate those little tricks from the literary approach - dynamics and motion and activity - as you go, and don't neglect the senses other than sight.

Begin with any overall impression

The usual recipe for great narrative still applies. You always start with a general impression (bearing in mind that one may be inherited from preceding narrative)

Necessary information

Follow the general impression with a broad description of anything that players to know about before they can make choices.

Compress and polish as you go

When the same broad description can apply to more than one element within the scene, use it to describe them both at the same time and in the same sentence.

Ending the narrative passage

Again, as usual, end with an interaction trigger - a dialogue prompt, NPC action, or a question to the players - and make sure that you have no such interaction triggers before you get to that point. Skip over something if necessary, saving it until the end of the narrative.

Further improvements

There are all sorts of exercises that you can use to practice your narrative skills. These work for both written and improvised narrative. I use them all when the occasion presents, especially if I know my narrative abilities are going to be challenged in the near future.

- ◆ **Write a novel or short story aloud** - Make up a story, telling it out loud as you go. Record it to listen for defects in delivery, especially regarding enunciation and the smooth flow of narrative - no awkward pauses while you think permitted!
- ◆ **Read fiction and pay attention** - Narrative problems are hardly new, writers have been grappling with them since the time of the Greeks if not longer. The more you read *and pay attention to how an author has done it*, the more you will soak up the hundreds of little nuances of technique. Robert A. Heinlein is famous for being able to impart context and narrative background while advancing the plot in his short stories, and makes a good starting point. This article/series has shown you what to look for - now go and look for it! (Hint: use a book that you can tolerate but that isn't one of your favorites, as the technical analysis can sometimes make it harder to enjoy that book in the future. Especially if you find that your favorite writers aren't as gifted as you thought they were).
- ◆ **Read how-to-write books & websites** - There are lots of these out there. A Google search on "how to write fiction" returned 156,000 entries. Another for "better writing" produced 424,000 responses. And those were using the literal phrase to target the most on-topic results. "Better writing" without the literal phrase yielded 719,000,000 results! "How to write fiction" gave 2,706 results at Amazon, while "better writing" gave 26,466 results - and that was restricting the search to the books department. There may well be documentaries and tutorials in the DVDs section as well!
- ◆ **Describe Visuals** - Find an "action photograph" - you can use [this Google search](#) if you like - then practice describing the scene as though it were narrative from an RPG. Start with the setting, and end with the activity. The goal is to be as descriptive as possible in as few words as possible. Try describing the photo over the phone to someone else. Start by doing it with the photo in front of you, then practice taking it away after an increasingly-brief look at the image, forcing you to fill in more of the details with your own imagination. And don't forget to describe the scene around where you, the observer, are, and what's behind you! You can also record this as suggested in exercise #1, and for the same purpose.
- ◆ **Hit the high points** - Synthesize a TV show that you have watched for someone else who has not, and who doesn't watch the show, describing the sets and the action and synthesizing the dialogue *from memory*. Start with a single scene (from the RPG perspective, not the TV perspective, which may use multiple camera angles, etc). Then move on to everything between two ad breaks. Then a complete half-hour show - picking something unusual that you don't normally watch, and that has strong visual elements. Work up to a full hour-long show. It's OK to have just watched it before you start this exercise; it's about practicing turning visuals that are *in your head* into visuals in words.

- ◆ **Re-imagine settings** - Pick a TV show or movie or photo from same, then re-imagine it as being from a completely different style of show, changing the details of the scene and the characters to conform with the new setting. Turn a western town into an underwater community populated by mermen. Turn a Manhattan street into a public thoroughfare on a futuristic space station. Turn - well, you get the idea!
- ◆ **Explore Visual shorthands** - Pick a photograph or freeze-frame from movie, TV show, or DVD. You have 60 seconds: Sum up what you can see in a single word that is as descriptive as you can possibly manage. Then describe a completely different aspect of the same scene with another word. Keep going until you run out of things to describe, or time runs out. Vary the time (shorter) occasionally to get practice at selecting the most important components of the scene.
- ◆ **Employ Metaphors and Abstractions creatively** - Obvious metaphors, abstractions, and the like are often considered to be lazy writing in literary circles. That doesn't mean that they can't be useful tools for deciding what to describe. Select an image from one of the usual sources, then try to mentally modify the image so that it reflects a metaphor, saying, or abstraction of your choosing from the point of view of one of the people in the scene or from the point of view of the viewer (if there isn't anyone in the scene). Some will be much harder than others, so if it doesn't happen, move on to another one, but give each a serious go. *(This exercise explores much the same territory as the "Caption This" memes on social media).*
- ◆ **Visual metaphors and cues** - A very long time ago, I wrote an article on the subject of [better descriptions using color & texture as metaphors & iconography](#) for Roleplaying Tips (it appeared in Issue #204 - and RPT is now up to Issue #623. So that's at least 420 weeks ago. At 52 a year...) Anyway, while the approach is somewhat outdated compared to what this article has presented, some of the specifics are still both relevant and valid. As was criticized at the time, the approach can be a bit much if over-used but saved for when you need something extra, can still be useful.
- ◆ **Practice with DVDs** - pause, examine, close your eyes, and describe. There's not much more to say.
- ◆ **Mental Prep** - Everyone should have a quick routine that they can use to clear and focus their minds. Specific techniques will vary in effectiveness from individual to individual. Find one and use it before you start, and as many times as you need to while GMing. It will help in every aspect of the craft, including enabling the crafting of better narrative. Once you have something that works for you, learn to use it anytime you are angry or emotionally upset for some real-life real-world benefits.
- ◆ **The interpretation Of Notes** - Watching a TV show - it could be reality TV or fictional, but game shows are often less effective - take notes as to what is happening. Make sure that you keep up. Stop writing and step away from your writing implement(s) during ad breaks. 24 hours later (the gap is to allow details to be forgotten, extend it if necessary), try to visualize the action from your notes. And 24 hours after that (same reason for the gap) try to insert the action into a completely different setting, modifying what happens accordingly. The first few times you try this, choose a short programme (half hour) and allow yourself to watch it immediately before re-watching it and taking the notes - then gradually wean yourself off this crutch and extend the length of the show - one hour, then 90 minutes (short movies), then full-length movies (about 2 hrs), then long movies.
- ◆ **More Hints** - Finally, I want to point you to some earlier articles here at Campaign Mastery on locations & location descriptions:
 - ◆ [Breaking Through Writer's Block Pt 2: Conceptual, Specific, and Setting Blocks](#) - the section on "Setting Blocks".
 - ◆ [The Poetry Of Place: Describing locations & scenes in RPGs](#) - the most directly-relevant of these links.
 - ◆ [Location, Location, Location - How Do You Choose A Location?](#)

- ◆ [People, Places, and Narratives: Matching Locations to plot needs](#)
- ◆ [Big Is Not Enough: Monuments and Places Of Wonder](#) - (Updated, for those who have seen it before, with an additional section in the comments)
- ◆ [Vampire's Creep and other stories: Working With Places](#)
- ◆ [Location, Location, Location! - the Roundup and Wrap-up \(for now\)](#) - many of the above were part of a Blog Carnival hosted by Campaign Mastery, and this article lists *all* the contributions to that Carnival. Some of the articles by other contributors are directly relevant, use these to find them.

The Keys to the Kingdom Of Literacy

The benefits to being able to turn out strong, concise narrative when you need it are so profound that every GM should invest time in bettering their skills in this area on a regular basis. This article/series - and make no mistake, it was conceived as a single (rather ambitious) article - should give you all the tools you need to start realizing those benefits in your games. The keys to the Kingdom of Literacy are yours! Do with them what you will...

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