

Sol Stein edited the work of major writers such as James Baldwin, Jack Higgins, David Frost and Elia Kazan, and founded the publishing house Stein and Day. He taught creative writing at Columbia, Iowa and the University of California at Irvine. He is the author of nine novels, including the million-copy bestseller *The Magician*. He died in 2019.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

The Husband
The Magician
Living Room
The Childkeeper
Other People
The Resort
The Touch of Treason
A Deniable Man
The Best Revenge

PLAYS

Napoleon (The Illegitimist)
(New York and California, 1953)
A Shadow of My Enemy
(National Theater, Washington D.C.
and Broadway, 1957)

NONFICTION

A Feast for Lawyers

Solutions for Writers

Practical Craft
Techniques for Fiction
and Nonfiction

SOL STEIN



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*For Liz,
who knows better,
with love*

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Preface

Some years ago I addressed the Southern California Chapter of the National Writers Club on a day when a rowboat might have been more appropriate than a car for getting to the meeting. The torrential rain seemed determined to widen the Pacific Ocean at the expense of a state that was once described to me as “mostly desert.” I managed the few hundred feet between the parking lot and the hotel without drowning. Once inside, I expected to find the meeting room deserted. Instead I happily discovered a full house, eighty-eight professional nonfiction writers and journalists come to hear me talk about fiction. I asked these weather-proof stalwarts, “How many of you want to write the Great American Novel?” and eighty-eight hands shot up.

If there are writers in America who do not have several hundred pages of a would-be novel in a drawer or at least in mind, I have not met them. Conversely, every novelist I’ve known has occasion to write nonfiction. For those writers who, at least initially, want to read only about fiction or nonfiction, I offer a road map to this book.

The Contents page provides an overview of the main subjects covered. Part I, “The Essentials,” is for all writers. Part II concerns the craft of fiction. Eavesdropping by nonfiction writers is permitted. Part III deals with subjects of interest to all writers. Part IV deals mainly with the application of fictional techniques for the enhancement of nonfiction. Part V, “Literary Values,” deals with upscale writing, both fiction and nonfiction. Part VI, “Revision,” has separate chapters for fiction and nonfiction. Part VII contains a chapter on where to get help, a final word, and a glossary of terms used by writers and editors.

The reader will find that I frequently use examples from writers I have known or worked with because their material is familiar to me. From time to time I also quote from my own work, allegedly for copyright reasons and convenience, but perhaps also to underscore that I practice what I teach. If I quote often from the *New York Times*, it is convenience as well as merit that guides me; it is the newspaper I read every day. The *Times* has also been in the vanguard of publications using the techniques of fiction to enhance journalism.

Preface

Women usually outnumber men among my students, readers, and friends, and I trust they will forgive me for using a male pronoun to stand for both genders. Saying “he or she” repeatedly is a distraction to both writer and reader.

I once went to a convention in Seattle, and three people gave me gifts of an umbrella for the trip. It didn’t rain. I hope this book has a few surprises for you.

Sol Stein
Scarborough, New York
May 1995

I

The Essentials

1

The Writer's Job May Be Different Than You Think

This is not a book of theory. It is a book of usable solutions—how to fix writing that is flawed, how to improve writing that is good, how to create interesting writing in the first place.

For thirty-six years I worked one-on-one with writers who had contract deadlines. My primary interest was to provide them with the techniques for solving editorial problems and improving their work in time to meet their deadlines. I could not provide writers with new genes, an ear, or talent. What I passed on was the craft other writers had developed to get their manuscripts in shape for publication.

As an editor and publisher, I frequently heard that an editor's job was to help the writer realize his intentions. That is true except for the fact that many writers have inappropriate intentions. The four most common I've heard are "I am expressing myself"; "I have something to say"; "I want to be loved by readers"; and "I need money." Those are all occasional outcomes of the correct intention, which is to provide the reader with an experience that is superior to the experiences the reader encounters in everyday life. If the reader is also rewarded with insights, it is not always the result of the writer's wisdom but of the writer's ability to create the conditions that enable pleasure to edify.

The writer comes to the editor bearing his talent, experience, and hope for his manuscript. The editor provides distance, experience with other writers, and the tools of craft that are efficient substitutes for trial and error. I have had the good fortune to work with some of the most successful writers of our time. They had much to teach me. What they taught and what they may have learned is in this book.

As a young writer brimming with hope and arrogance, I was subjected, luckily, to the wisdom and tyranny of several extraordinary

teachers of writing: Wilmer Stone, Theodore Goodman, Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling, and Thornton Wilder. I would like to convey the most important thing I learned from each.

Wilmer Stone was faculty advisor to *The Magpie*, the literary magazine of DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, New York, then one of the best-known public secondary schools in the United States. In those remarkable days, DeWitt Clinton served not only its neighborhood but qualified students from anywhere else in the vastness of New York City. One of them was James Baldwin, who, each school day, took the long subway ride from Harlem in Manhattan to DeWitt Clinton at the topmost part of the Bronx. Out of our adolescent camaraderie came his most extraordinary book, *Notes of a Native Son*, which he much later would claim I compelled him to publish.

Each Friday afternoon at three, while other students decamped for their homes, the lights were on in the *Magpie* tower high above the rectangle of the school. There Wilmer Stone met with Richard Avedon, then a poet, who became one of the most famous photographers in the world, the editor Emile Capouya, Jimmy Baldwin, myself, and a few others whose names hide behind the scrim of time. What went on in that tower was excruciatingly painful. Wilmer Stone read our stories to us in a monotone as if he were reading from the pages of a phone directory. What we learned with each stab of pain was that the words themselves and not the inflections supplied by the reader had to carry the emotion of the story.

Today I still hear the metronome of Wilmer Stone's voice, and counsel my students to have their drafts read to them by the friend who has the least talent for acting and is capable of reading words as if they had no meaning.

My family was depression-poor, and the only college I could try for was one whose expense would be as close to zero as possible. In those days the College of the City of New York, better known as CCNY, took in the top fifteen percent of New York City high school graduates, whose only expense would be secondhand books and subway fare. There Theodore Goodman's reputation was such that all who had a craving to write gravitated toward his classes. To teach short story writing, he had us read James Joyce's "The Dead" over and over. It was from this practice that I learned the value of dissecting a piece of writing repeatedly until it surrendered its secrets.

The most important thing I took away from Teddy Goodman came about at the beginning of the one private conference each student was

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entitled to. I was by then a head taller than Goodman, but he was Napoleon to us all. He glared at me and said, "Look how you're dressed."

I looked down and could see only what I had seen in the mirror that morning, the suit and shirt and tie that was customary for students at the time.

"Your suit is blue," he said. "Your shirt is blue, your tie is blue. That's what's wrong with your writing."

When my ordeal was over I slunk away from Goodman's cubicle to rethink the sameness of my writing and to learn the value of variety. It took some time for me to learn the other lesson, that a writer, shy or not, needs a tough skin, for no matter how advanced one's experience and career, expert criticism cuts to the quick, and one learns to endure and to perfect, if for no other reason than to challenge the pain-maker.

The master's seminar I attended at Columbia University was with William York Tindall, who continued Goodman's process of closely examining a single piece of work to teach us how to read other works. That seminar created an appetite for what was then quite possibly the best-known doctoral seminar in America, led in discordant concert by two extraordinary men, Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling, both of whom left their marks in writing as well as teaching.

The official title of the seminar was "Backgrounds in Contemporary Thought and Culture." Its true subject was "So you think you know how to write? Let's see." It was a tough course to get into. Thirty-five were selected, and only eight students survived the academic year. Each week we had to read a designated book and write a piece about it. The piece would come under as close a scrutiny as any editor ever gave a work.

A cocky Sol Stein thought he would trick his advisors and submitted a typed version of an article of his that had already been published as the lead piece in an academic journal. Barzun and Trilling skewered my prose with almost as much comment in the margins as I had on the page. What had been acceptable to the magazine was not acceptable to their higher standard. What I learned from my destroyed work were the two simple objectives of all prose writing, to be clear and to be precise. Precision and clarity became my watchwords, my guides to self-correction, and my most prized editing tools, especially six or seven years later when I was editing the work of both Barzun and Trilling for the *Mid-Century* magazine.

I was a playwright long before I became a novelist. In 1952, a year before I saw my first play on stage, I was granted back-to-back playwrighting

fellowships at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, and the McDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. To my astonishment, my employer, the U.S. State Department, granted me leave for both. At Yaddo, I occupied what was known as the Carson McCullers cottage, though the vibrations came not from the spirit of Carson McCullers but from two thousand bees whose colony was embedded in the hollow wall. On arriving at McDowell, I was given an even greater surprise for a young playwright. Though most of the people there were composers and painters, there was one other playwright, Thornton Wilder. What a mind-walloping opportunity: one of the most accomplished American playwrights of the century and a neophyte working on his first play in the same environment!

Thornton Wilder taught me two things. First, the necessity of sitting through bad plays, to witness coughing and squirming in the audience, to have ears up like a rabbit to catch what didn't work, to observe how little tolerance an audience has for a mishap, ten seconds of boredom breaking an hour-long spell. I was soon to take advantage of the New Dramatists Committee, an organization that enabled me to see free of charge some sixty plays in less than two years. I learned more from the painfully bad than from the few remarkable plays that kept me enthralled. Today, I urge my students once they have begun to master craft, to read a few chapters of John Grisham's *The Firm*, or some other transient bestseller, to see what they can learn from the mistakes of writers who don't heed the precise meanings of the words they use. They also learn to read the work of literary prize-winners to detect the rare uncaught error in craft. What they are doing is perfecting their editorial eye and their self-editing talent, learning to read as a writer.

Wilder taught me something else. He took me to watch a country square dance from an unoccupied balcony in a recreation hall, and pointed out things that writers are supposed to see. The New Hampshire folk came to dances in families—mothers, fathers, and adolescent children. As we watched from the balcony, Wilder pointed out the barely noticeable sexual interplay between fathers and daughters and mothers and sons as they danced the evening away. In the fifties, a dull age in which so much was forbidden, Wilder taught me that what a writer deals with is the unspoken, what people see or sense in silence. It is our job, in nonfiction as well as fiction, to juxtapose words that reveal what previously may have been blinked, and provide insights obscured by convention and shame.

* * *

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The century I have inhabited has not seen the abandonment of war and violence. It has not solved the problem of poverty, nor has it improved human nature. However, we can credit the century with producing the public realization that sex has to be good for both partners. That is also the key to writing both fiction and nonfiction. It has to be a good experience for both partners, the writer and the reader, and it is a source of distress to me to observe how frequently writers ignore the pleasure of their partners.

The pleasures of writer and reader are interwoven. The seasoned writer of both nonfiction and fiction, confident in his craft, derives increasing pleasure from his work. The reader in the hands of a writer who has mastered his craft enjoys a richer experience.

When I ask a group of professional writers to state the essential difference between nonfiction and fiction, most are unable to do so. And when they try, an audience of one hundred will provide answers so disparate as to seem to come from a hundred different planets rather than common experience. Let us state the difference in the simplest way.

Nonfiction conveys information.

Fiction evokes emotion.

Because the intended results are so different, the mind-sets required for writing fiction and nonfiction are different. In fiction, when information obtrudes the experience of the story pauses. Raw information comes across as an interruption, the author filling in. The fiction writer must avoid anything that distracts from the experience even momentarily. A failure to understand this difference between nonfiction and fiction is a major reason for the rejection of novels.

Though the ostensible purpose of nonfiction is the conveyance of information, if that information is in a raw state, the writing seems pedestrian, black-and-white facts in a colorful world. The reader, soon bored, yearns for the images, anecdotes, characterization, and writerly precision that make informational writing come alive on the page. That is where the techniques of fiction can be so helpful to the nonfiction writer.

Over many years I have observed that the failure of story writers is often attributable to an incontrovertible fact. We are all writers from an early age. Most of what we write is nonfiction—essays for school, letters to friends, memoranda to colleagues—in which we are trying to pass on information. We are raised with a traditional nonfiction mind-set. Even when we write love letters, we are trying to communicate how we feel and not necessarily trying to evoke an emotion in the recipient, though that might be better suited to our purpose.

In previous centuries, when letter writing was more often than today a form of personal art, letters had more of an emotional effect on readers, even those to whom the writing was not addressed, as we know from reading some of the great correspondence that has been collected in books.

The lifelong habit of writing traditional nonfiction, passing on information, is curable through attention to the fiction writer's primary job, which is creating *an emotional experience for the reader*. The novelist is like the conductor of an orchestra, his back to the audience, his face invisible, summoning the experience of music for the people he cannot see. The writer as conductor also gets to compose the music and play all of the instruments, a task less formidable than it seems. What it requires is the conscious practice of providing an extraordinary experience for the reader, who should be oblivious to the fact that he is seeing words on paper.

A second matter insinuates itself between the writer and success. All of us, in our daily speech to others, are not only trying to communicate information but to get something off our minds and into the consciousness of the listeners. When we write, we put down on paper what we think, know, or believe we know and pay little attention to the effect on the reader. That is discourteous in life and unsuccessful in writing.

We practice our craft to service the reader, not our psyches. The material we deal with may come from our observation and insight. As writers we don't expel the result as raw material, we transmute it to provide what the reader most wants, an experience different from and richer than what he daily abides in life. As E. L. Doctorow once put it, "Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader, not the fact that it's raining, but the feeling of being rained upon."

The good news is that the nonfiction mind-set has been changing. In recent years, ambitious journalists and writers of nonfiction books have increasingly adopted some of the techniques of fiction to enhance the readers' experience of their writing. In journalism, the change has been revolutionary. In the early part of the twentieth century, journalists were taught to provide readers with the who, what, when, where, and why of their stories in the first paragraph. The result was the reader read the first paragraph and, sated, moved on to the first paragraph of the next story. How frustrating it must have been for journalists writing pieces of ten or fifteen or twenty paragraphs, finding readers skipping away after the first. Today, the best of good journalists are arousing their readers' curi-

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osity in the first paragraph and seducing them into the rest of the story. A news story has become a story that contains the news.

In television, where new programs are frequent and often short-lived, one exemplar of broadcast journalism that has lasted more than a quarter of a century is *60 Minutes*, which weekly holds an audience of tens of millions. Its creator, Don Hewitt, tells us, "TV is good not when you see it or hear it but when you feel it." Though it deals in fact, *60 Minutes*, like fiction, is concerned with evoking the emotions of its audience.

Don Hewitt's creation thrives on the revelation of character. Its interviewers peel layers of camouflage to reveal matters that its subjects would rather conceal, it uncovers cover-ups, it causes people to speak of things that are revelatory, incriminating, or painful. The segments often bring out the dark side of human nature, which at times excites its audience's interest in the opposite, justice and goodwill. It does, in other words, what creative writing aspires to.

It should not be surprising that *60 Minutes* has had imitators that do not imitate well, programs of scandal and gossip laden with sentimentality and cloaked in melodrama. An unfortunate amount of so-called transient fiction does the same thing.

Though the new nonfiction uses some of the techniques of fiction, important differences exist. Nonfiction stems from fact, and all attempts to evoke emotion in its readership cannot—or at least should not—take leave from its roots. It can make us feel what happened, but dares not invent what happened. Nonfiction can describe effectively what people do and thereby move us, but it cannot invent those actions. Nonfiction can report what people say, but it cannot guess what they were thinking. To help us understand the essential difference between nonfiction and fiction, let's look at an example:

TRADITIONAL NONFICTION: New York City has more than 1,400 homeless people.

BETTER NONFICTION: The man who has laid claim to the bench on the corner of 88th Street and Park Avenue is one of New York City's 1,400 homeless people.

FICTION: His skin the color of rust, the man sits on his park bench next to his bag of belongings, staring at the brightly lit windows in the apartments across the street, at the strange race of people who still have hope.

In the transition from plain fact to fiction, we lose statistics and focus on the individual character. The writer, having invented the character, can convey what the character thinks.

To orient us, consider for a moment the relationship between the writer, the book, and the reader. The writer, of course, writes the book. The book then acts on the reader's mind and emotions, unseen by the writer. In fact when the writer finishes his work, he can vanish from the earth and his book will continue to affect the reader's mind and emotions. The writer becomes dispensable. The work must do the job.

Can a novelist or story writer work on the reader's emotions consciously while writing a first draft? Not easily, except through long practice and prowess. But the less experienced writer can *plan* the reader's adventure before he writes each scene, and in revising that scene after a respite away from it, with the steel gaze of an editor he can see how the reader's experience might be improved.

What of the nonfiction writer who sees himself solely as the communicator of fact, who is offended by the idea of working on the emotions of his audience? We sometimes speak of academic writing, of courtroom transcripts, of material that does not compel our attention or elicit a strong desire to continue reading, as *dry*. What we mean by "dry" is that it does not enable us to see as we read, it does not move us, and, most important, it does not stimulate our intellect with insight, its ostensible purpose. The writers of thousands of academic articles and books each year, of hundreds of thousands of legal papers and millions of business memoranda, are discourteous to their readers and fail in their purpose. They do not understand the power of language or the techniques for its use.

Isn't there something distasteful in evoking the emotions of an audience? Some of the great villains of our age have been spellbinders, working the public's emotions. In old newsreels we see Hitler in the Nuremberg stadium or Mussolini on his balcony building frenzy in an audience that has abdicated sense for sensation. But we are moved by heroes as well, often as a result of war: Lincoln, Churchill, Roosevelt. Their effect lies in the language they are cloaked in. Let us consider for a moment the most admired of the three. The historian Shelby Foote reminds us, "Lincoln was highly intelligent. Almost everything he did was calculated for effect." That statement is one no writer should ever forget. "Almost everything he did was calculated for effect."

We like to think of ourselves as moved to action by facts and reason, yet we shrink from politicians who may have got their facts right but

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who bore us with language that is flat, cliché-ridden, robbed of effectiveness by their unimaginative prose. They want us to agree; what we feel is utter boredom. Researchers, scientists, academicians marshal their facts to a higher standard, but with their neglect of the emotive power of language they often speak only to each other, their parochial words dropping like sand on a private desert.

Despite our alleged reverence for fact, the truth is that our adrenaline rises most in response to effective expression. When a writer or speaker understands the electricity of fresh simile and metaphor, his choice of words empowers our feelings, his language compels our attention, acceptance, and action. When Shakespeare speaks, when Lincoln orates, we are moved not by information but by the excellence of their diction. Alone in a living room, our book lit by a chair-side lamp, we are enraptured by what is said because of the author's choice of words and their order on the page. The best of good writing will entice us into subjects and knowledge we would have declared were of no interest to us until we were seduced by the language they were dressed in.

This book encompasses both modes of writing, fiction and nonfiction. The practitioners of each have differing attitudes. In my experience, most novelists and short story writers are eager to improve their craft, even after they have been published many times. Nonfiction writers who do not have to create living characters are sometimes complacent about a craft in which publication comes easier and is paid for with greater regularity. This book may inspire some nonfiction writers to reach for treasure on a higher shelf.

Fiction and nonfiction both can benefit from the writer's imagination as well as his memory. For the story writer, witnessing—or remembering—incidents in life must be more than an act of reporting. It is the taking-off point not of what happened, but of what might have happened. That is what enables some fiction to provide us with an experience that we characterize as extraordinary.

Reporting in nonfiction can be accurate, like a photograph taken merely to record. The best of nonfiction, however, sets what it sees in a framework, what has happened elsewhere or in the past. As the recorded events march before us, a scrim lifts to convey another dimension, the highlighting focuses our attention, sight becomes insight, reporting becomes art. The evidence is in this book.

For the writer who intends to master his craft, I have a small-craft warning.

Imagine yourself as a youngster standing beside a bicycle for the first time. You watched someone riding this two-wheeled vehicle in a straight line. You may have wondered how the rider kept his balance, why the bicycle didn't tip over. At your side is an experienced bicyclist who tells you how it's done. You learn that by holding the handlebars steady and pedaling fast the bicycle moves forward without tipping. You are told that by steering gently with the handlebars, turning the front wheel in the direction you want to go, you can manipulate the vehicle elegantly, avoiding pedestrians and other obstacles, as long as you keep pedaling. If you stop pedaling or even slow too much, the bicycle will become unstable, wobbly, and your control of it will loosen until the bicycle will sway to one side and start to fall. You learn that to halt you have to press the hand brakes just so and be prepared to lower a leg for stability as you come to a stop.

Those are the essentials of cycling, but it doesn't mean you can ride a bicycle. What you need is practice. You learn to coordinate your movements. You discover how rapidly you have to rotate the pedals in order to keep the bicycle moving, and how to redirect the handlebars gradually to turn a corner. Only with repetition do you find out how to slow down and stop without tipping over. Once you master riding, what you have learned will stay with you for the rest of your life. You may abandon the bicycle for an automobile, then years later take it up for exercise and find that in moments you are rolling ahead, fully coordinated, your brain responding to what you learned in your practice sessions long ago.

It is the same with writing.

Except that writers provide themselves with a monumental obstacle to achieving skill. Ballet dancers practice technique. Pianists wear down their black and white keys with hours of daily practice. Actors rehearse, and rehearse again. Painters perfect still-life objects at various angles, practice obtaining the best perspectives, experiment with color and texture, do sketches in preparation for oil. By practice one learns to use what one has understood. Only writers, it seems, expect to achieve some level of mastery without practice.

Do all writers resist the techniques that will help them master their craft? No. Some, eager to get published, seize on the advice of anybody with an authoritative title or a persuasive personality. Others find excuses for not writing at the same time every day, balk at re-revising incessantly, or excuse themselves because their lives are beset by difficulties. I am deaf to that excuse because I worked with the most disadvantaged writer in history, Christy Brown, who had the use of his

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brain, the little toe on his left foot, and little else. When he was a seemingly helpless baby lying on the kitchen floor of a cottage in Ireland, his remarkable mother saw him reach out with his left foot and with his one good toe manage to pick up a crayon that one of his siblings had dropped. That was the beginning of a writer. Eventually someone at IBM made a special typewriter for Christy that enabled him to punch in a letter at a time with his one working toe. I published five of Christy Brown's books, one of which made the national bestseller lists. I urge you to see the video of a remarkable film called *My Left Foot*. It won an Oscar for Daniel Day-Lewis, who played Christy. The film may cure you of fishing for an excuse for not writing.

Once in California I had a letter from a nonfiction writer who wanted desperately to write fiction but wondered if at sixty she was too old to begin. I told her that Elia Kazan was fifty-seven when he started with fiction and that I had published four active octogenarians in a single year, the lexicographer Eric Partridge, J. B. Priestley, Hannah Tillich, and Bertram Wolfe. If you're a writer, you are never retired by someone else. You not only keep going, but the very act of writing helps keep you alive.

More than half a millennium ago, Chaucer, the great English writer of the Middle Ages, had this to say about the writer's work:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquering.

Life is short, Chaucer is telling us, the craft takes long to learn, the work is hard, but ah, when it is right, the writer's triumph soars. Few among contemporary writers have expressed that pleasure as well as Kate Bra-verman did about finishing her remarkable short story "Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta":

Writing is like hunting. There are brutally cold afternoons with nothing in sight, only the wind and your breaking heart. Then the moment when you bag something big. The entire process is beyond intoxicating. As soon as Lenny began speaking, I knew I had main-lined it. I felt like I was strapped in the cockpit with the stars in my face and the expanding universe on my back. In my opinion, that's the only way a writer should travel. When I finished "Tall Tales" I thought, this one is a keeper. This is a trophy brought back from the further realm, the kingdom of perpetual glistening night where we know ourselves absolutely. This one goes on the wall.

THE ESSENTIALS

As you perfect your craft through practice, remember the joy of finally getting on a bicycle and riding to your destination without giving a second thought to the technique that now comes naturally. Experience the pleasure of getting the right word, the right phrase, the right sentence, the right paragraph, and finally the ecstasy of creating a keeper for your wall.

Come Right In: First Sentences, First Paragraphs

FICTION

Elia Kazan, brilliant director of stage and screen as well as a late-blooming novelist, told me that audiences give a film seven minutes. If the viewer is not intrigued by character or incident within that time, the film and its viewer are at odds. The viewer came for an experience. The film is disappointing him.

Today's impatient readers give a novelist fewer than seven minutes. Some years ago I was involved in an informal study of the behavior of lunch-hour browsers in mid-Manhattan bookstores. In the fiction section, the most common pattern was for the browser to read the front flap of the book's jacket and then go to page one. No browser went beyond page three before either taking the book to the cashier or putting the book down and picking up another to sample.

Thereafter, whenever an author told me that his novel really got going on page ten or twenty or thirty, I had to pass on the news that his book in all likelihood was doomed unless he could revise it so that the first three pages aroused the reader's interest enough to quarantine him from distraction for the several hours the book demanded from him.

Readers have not grown more patient since that bit of research was conducted. Today, first sentences and first paragraphs of any writing are increasingly important for arousing the restless reader.

Arousal is nature's stimulus for the propagation of the human race. The unaroused male of the species is as useless for that purpose as a worm. Arousal can happen sooner or later, but it must happen.

Similarly arousal is an author's stimulus for the reader. Without early arousal, the reader does not yet trust that he will enjoy the experience that the writer has prepared. The ideal goals of an opening paragraph are: