Mining the World of Writing Material

"Write what you know." If there ever was an old chestnut of writing advice for our students, this is it. Yet what should we do with the student who claims he doesn't know anything? The author has some suggestions.

Evan Balkan

Johnny, a mild-mannered nineteen-year-old with a soft spot for hardcore gangsta rap, enters his apartment after working a hard day down at the local convenience store. Unfortunately for Johnny, a homicidal freak is lying in wait for him on the other side of the door. After this freak splatters Johnny's brains across the floor, he says something cool, such as, "That's for Janie" or, "How you like me now?" Johnny's life has ended—and so has the story.

Why has Johnny been killed? Beats me. Who was that guy who played the part of the killer? I don't have the foggiest idea. What of that cryptic message the killer left behind before he parted? Couldn't even begin to tell you. And unfortunately, neither could the author of the story. And even more unfortunately, these are precisely the types of stories I often get from my students in my undergraduate creative writing courses.

Don't get me wrong: violence in a story doesn't necessarily disqualify it from having value. Tobias Wolfe's "Bullet in the Brain" is a wonderful example of how a homicide can be told with exquisite beauty. But in Wolfe's story, the violent act is used as a catalyst for the protagonist's sweet recollection of a bygone summer day, thick with humidity, cut grass, and the sounds of boys playing baseball. But without that catalyst, it's just violence for violence's sake, which is not only unbelievable, but is frankly, uninteresting.

"Why have you written this story?" I ask the student.

"Because that stuff happens."

I suppose that might be true, but a lot of the stuff that "happens" is downright boring. We don't read to escape to a world that could be the one we live in every day. People sleep, they eat, they go to the bathroom; we don't need to hear about these things in a story. Unless, of course, showing one of these activities is essential to the story itself, to the "single effect." For example, if an insomniac spends her nights prowling the city tending to gardens, picking up trash, or delivering blankets to homeless people, the author should construct an early scene where she is in bed, struggling to fall asleep. Or if a character cannot get off the toilet seat because it might blow up, we need to see this, too. Otherwise, these mundane activities should be left out.
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But this is mostly beside the point anyway. How often do people really shoot each other for no reason at all? If a robber demands another person’s wallet, making off with ten bucks and an ATM card, surely this is not a good reason to kill someone, but there is a reason nonetheless. The robber wanted money.

So I go back to my student, and I suggest as much. When it comes time for revision, the class gets an updated version in which Johnny is involved in some seedy underworld of drugs, porn, and light weapons. Now Johnny’s murder makes sense. He has been killed for retribution over his failure to deliver a few pounds of cocaine to Mario, who is the boss of the underworld and would no doubt, if he were described, wear diamond pinky rings and have his black hair slicked back, maybe a drip of grease on his fedora.

This image comes straight from film. Writers like to lament that film is killing their art. I don’t buy it. Writers can still travel years in the space of a paragraph. Doing so in film requires intense, and often grotesque, makeup jobs or new actors who bear only a slight resemblance to their earlier or later incarnations.

But one thing that film has done is set a precedent for a world where guns and babes and clever one-liners rule. It is not surprising, then, that in my short-story classes, I get a whole slew of stories that attempt to imitate this world. Characters like Johnny abound because they are the instantly recognizable victims of shallow-plotted dramas where being bad is natural and being good becomes a rationale for being offered by corrupt officials or supersmooth gangsters.

I don’t mean to imply that movies with these thin plot lines should be outlawed. I have no problem with them. It’s just that when the same plot lines make their way into freshman creative writing classes, the result often looks like a comic book. In

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Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment, for example, the murder of the pawnbroker and her sister is not the point; it takes place very early in the book. It is the protagonist’s reckoning with the murder—the psychological torture of it—that is what makes the story into perhaps the most brilliant novel ever written.

There are certain maxims that writers should follow. The cardinal rule is “Write what you know.” It is true that perhaps Dostoevsky did not “know” murder, but he surely knew the psychology of guilt, the torture of anguish, the attempt to play out in reality what had existed previously only in theory. These ideas are what Crime and Punishment is all about. The murder of the pawnbroker and her sister is only the catalyst.

So when my students defend their prized murder stories, they tell me that they do know murder, and they do. But I contend that they only think they know, and I have to delicately suggest to them that they are quite lucky that they don’t really know what they see on screen. Shooting someone in real life can’t be a pleasant experience. Surely one wouldn’t be inclined to blow smoke from a gun barrel and deliver a cool one-liner. The agony of the death, the slow approach of a puddle of blood—these are more “real” and far more unpleasant.

So upon second draft, I will pull the student aside and ask why he or she felt strongly about writing the Johnny murder story. There’s rarely a good answer. The student didn’t feel strongly. He only wrote what he thinks stories are supposed to do. Isn’t something horrible supposed to happen?

“But what do you have at stake?” I ask. “You wrote the story because one was due. But why is it important, why is it necessary, for you to write this story? Why must this story be told? And why must you be the one to tell it?”

Soon the student sees my point. Rehashing Die Hard is not a necessary endeavor. “Well then, what do I write about?” they ask. Good question. Though I dutifully tell my students maxim number 1, “Write what you know,” I often break that rule myself, sometimes with disastrous results.

Last year, I wrote a story that had a female protagonist. In it, I wrote a scene in which she enters a room where three guys are sitting around, recollecting their days in college. When the protagonist enters, the air is thick with sexual tension. The guys stop what they are doing and look at her. Simple enough. I had submitted this story to my workshop group at Johns Hopkins. What I failed to do, my female workshop colleagues pointed out, was account for the fact that no female ever walks into a room filled with men and not think about her body. Women are used to being objectified, they told me, and my protagonist, to make the scene believable, has to be hyper-conscious of her body and of
the fact that the men in the room are looking at her first and foremost as a sexual creature. She has to do something, they told me, even if it's a self-conscious sweep of her hand over her chest.

When they pointed this out to me, I realized that I had failed to account for a lot of things that would occur to female writers and female readers. In this case, I surely didn't "write what I know." And the result was an unbelievable protagonist, and a story that fell flat as a result. Of course, this is not to say that this rule can't be broken either.

For example, because of my experience and fascination with travel, I sometimes set fiction in locations where I've never been. The novel I'm working on now begins in the Tenere Desert in Niger and makes its way eventually to the diamond mines of Sierra Leone. I've never been there either, but I can justify the choice of location because the novel is not about Niger, it's not about Sierra Leone; it's about a naïve American's reaction to places in the world that are far different from the place he calls home. Having been to over twenty countries, having gone on trips for months at a time, I do know what this feels like, and I believe that I can write about it competently. As for the details of place, I can use books, photographs, the Internet, and a whole host of other sources to make my readers believe that the place about which I'm writing is as real to me as if I've lived there my whole life. Indeed, writers often choose settings in eras that passed long before the authors were even born.

Still, my students protest.

"But I'm only eighteen," one told me. "I haven't been anywhere besides Daytona Beach on spring break. I still live at home, and I can't even write much there because my stupid grandmother always wants to know what I'm doing."

"Tell me about your grandmother," I responded.

"She's annoying. She can barely speak English."

"Why not?"

"She's from Lithuania."

"Lithuania. Really? What do you know about Lithuania?"

"More than I want to know. Every time I complain about something, grandma reminds me about living in Lithuania under the Soviets."

Why would this student choose to write a blood and guts gangland story because he thinks it's "real" when he has access to a Lithuanian grandmother who is, no doubt, a storehouse of great stories? The answer is because teenagers often think their lives are crushingly dull and that nothing interesting ever happens. What they fail to see is that the world around them is a fascinating place, replete with fascinating stories, a gold mine of material.

These same students need to respect and honor the stories in their own lives, the things they know as human beings. Once they do this, the writing becomes truer than anything they called reality before.

Figuring this out is the first step to being a writer, and once my students understand this, their work takes off. Instead of getting stories about Johnny and an unnamed murderer and an underworld boss named Mario, I get stories about young Lithuanian girls who tie outlawed manuscripts to their thighs, under their dresses; manuscripts about the terrors of the Soviet system, passing these manuscripts to friends even though getting caught would result in severe punishment. In other words, "real" stories of real people.

Students who are writing creatively about subjects of interest in their lives are thinking critically about the immediate world around them. These skills translate not only to fiction, but to composition and literature courses as well; in fact, to all courses that require writing. These same students, when given an assignment to write a personal essay, are going to be inclined to go far beyond a cursory examination of their lives just to satisfy the assignment and instead will search for something unique and valuable to say.

An example of this is my student, Dolly. She had come to Baltimore from Bombay just days before the semester began. Dolly was in my Composition 101 class and had been sitting in on my creative writing course. She listened attentively to my lectures on looking for material in the students' immediate lives. When it came time for her to do a compare and contrast essay in the composition class, she came to me with grave concerns about her abilities to pull it off.

"I do not know enough about America," she told me, "to make intelligent claims about life here. I cannot compare and contrast things I do not know."

I asked her why not.

"Well," she explained, "Life is so much different here in Baltimore than it is in Bombay."

"How so?" I asked.

As Dolly began to list the ways her home was different from her new city, her face suddenly lit up. "I guess this is a compare and contrast?" she asked.

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Absolutely. Dolly’s was by far the most interesting essay in class. While most students settled for the differences between watching a movie on a VCR versus watching one in a theater, or something just as obvious, Dolly was busy writing about her world, creating little “stories” about fruit sellers on the streets in Bombay and the air-conditioned mega supermarkets in Baltimore. In describing both, she wrote about the bustle, the smells, the sensations of each. Dolly’s essay was great precisely because she began to think critically about the world around her. This is what fiction writers must master.

Students need to be encouraged to look at their lives—list the places they’ve visited or lived; recount the happenings in their neighborhoods; think hard about the relationships they’ve formed, with friends, family, or familiar people they pass on the street or on campus—and steal the rich material that hangs all around them. Once done, real writing can begin. In short, the students will figure out what’s at stake, and why it’s important to tell their stories.

The rest should be left to the movie directors.

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