

[The Write Place at the Write Time](#)

Home

About Us

Interviews

Fiction

Poetry

"Our Stories" non-fiction

Writers' Craft Box

Book Reviews

Submission Guidelines

Feedback & Questions

Artists' Gallery

Indie Bookstores

Literary Arts Patrons

Scrapbook of Seven Years

Archives

Inscribing Industry Blog

Come in...and be captivated...

Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:
Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools



"Arts and Crafts" N.M.B Copyright 2008

that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Writers' Challenge!



"Tree Roots" by Patti Dietrick; <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pattidietrick/>

About this image: *"I dreamt I was a tree...and my roots were aching because they were growing so much. I started photographing trees and roots for many, many weeks trying to illustrate my dream—this is one of those images."* —PD

Reclamation of Roots

by Nicole M. Bouchard (*see About Us page for staff bio*)

Back due to popular demand, we have a Writers' Challenge prepared for you. The above image by Patti Dietrick, a photograph illustrating a dream she'd had of being a tree with growing, aching roots, serves as the visual inspiration. Ms. Dietrick, whose artistic photography has graced the Craft Box in our two preceding issues, will do us the honor of serving as a guest judge to determine the winner from amongst our selected finalists.

Reflecting the theme of growth outstretched from an original source, the concept of this challenge spread across a mental landscape seeking nourishment in knowledge. How do we really define "roots" and what are some creative ways that those definitions can be explored? Using the age-old oracle of Google, I typed the word in and came across two varying

artistic interpretations that I'll share here for your further (optional) exploration.

The first is the painting, *Roots* by Frida Kahlo. We tend to think of the earth, of nature, as nurturing us during the course of our lifetimes, but the unique angle explored here is that Frida depicts herself as a nourisher of the land, with vines sprouting forth from her torso, life-force pouring back into the arid ground. In this reversal, one might interpret it as suggesting an equalized, reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. You'll find a link to the image below and an analysis; gaze upon it and derive your own personal meaning.

Link: <http://www.fridakahlo.org/roots.jsp>

The second is a song of the same title by the contemporary American rock band, Imagine Dragons. The song portrays a man's desired return to his roots following a descent to "rock bottom" and the subsequent loss of belief. Yet its message asks of us, is there is direction found in being lost— "Had to lose my way / To know which road to take"—and adversity necessary for growth—"I know it's gotta go like this, I know / Hell will always come before you grow"? One link below corresponds to the lyrics and the other to the audio video on YouTube. Go ahead and take a listen.

Links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4RMh7NLHPY>
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/imaginedragons/roots.html>

I also searched the general definition of "root" and came across its literal botanical meaning, connotations of origin, heritage, being a source (for good or ill) as well as the meanings of the verb, including "[to] establish deeply or firmly" which I was particularly partial to. The word originates from the Old Norse term *rót*. I was compelled to dig deeper. I wanted to get closer to the original meaning. I took the English letters, and, after a bit of research, was able to return them to their runic equivalents.

The first, is a symbol for journey. The second speaks of native lands and heritage. The third, resembling a skyward facing arrow, is equated with the Norse god Teiwaz and depicts battle. Warriors would paint it on their shields for a favorable outcome. The journey of life we take, the character-shaping battles or obstacles we face and the heritage, the family ties we carry with us in our hearts, in our blood as we go, seems a fitting portrayal of what connects our roots to our lives and one another. We all journey, we

all have maps of native lands and faces tattooed onto our souls and we all encounter obstacles as lessons learned along the path, raised shields with pointed arrows as we persevere.

What you're being asked to do in this challenge, is to respond in any written or artistic medium with what "roots" means to you. Please include a brief commentary depicting a bit about your process to go with your entry in the body of the e-mail. Entries should be sent to contests (at) thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org by December 15th. There will be two finalists whose names will be included in the winter/spring issue and one winner with their winning entry featured. The winner will receive a \$20 giftcard to Barnes & Noble bookstore.

Discover your "roots."

Essay

Craft Box Contributor Bio:

Author, editor, dissertation and writing coach, and spiritual counselor, Noelle Sterne has published over 300 pieces in print and online venues, including *Author Magazine*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Funds for Writers*, *Children's Book Insider*, *Graduate Schools Magazine*, *Inspire Me Today*, *Pen & Prosper*, *Romance Writers Report*, *Transformation Magazine*, *Unity Magazine*, *Women in Higher Education*, *Women on Writing*, *Writer's Monthly Review Magazine*, *Writer's Digest*, and *The Writer*. She has also published pieces in various anthologies, including *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books; has contributed several columns to writing publications; is a volunteer judge for *Rate Your Story*; and is a regular contributor to *InnerSelf Magazine* and the Text and Academic Authors Association blog. With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Noelle has for 30 years helped doctoral candidates complete their dissertations (finally).

Based on her practice, her new handbook addressing dissertation writers' overlooked but very important nonacademic difficulties is published by Rowman & Littlefield Education. The title: *Challenges in Writing Your Dissertation: Coping with the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Spiritual Struggles*.

A PowerPoint “teaser” appears here:

<http://bit.ly/1ML2QSa>

In Noelle's previous book, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books, 2011), she draws examples from her academic consulting and other aspects of life to help readers release regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings.

Her webinar about Trust Your Life can be seen on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95EeqllONIQ&feature=youtu.be>.

Visit Noelle's website: www.trustyourlifenow.com

A Shocking Short Story Technique: Expand Your Story's Scope

by Noelle Sterne

We've probably been taught that short stories illumine a single dark corner of life or experience, narrowly circumscribed. They follow the time-revered rule: Limit your story to a specific time, place, event, interaction, or character's evolution. But the short story can be a more versatile genre than your high school English teacher sermonized. If we abide by too narrow a view, we may restrict or dilute our subjects or abandon potentially powerful ideas.

What's Expansion?

Expansion in short stories is rarely, if ever, discussed in texts or fiction seminars and may sound a lot like background, setting, exposition, or backstory. But some stories maintain the character of the short story and introduce a broader outlook than we've been taught to expect. These stories carry a greater perspective and elicit more powerful responses than the more typical narrower story.

When you expand the scope of your story, you can encompass grand events—physical, historical, generational, psychological, emotional. You may evoke a sense of time and distance, stretching the reader's mind beyond the expected confines of the short story. For example, expansions may synopsise a cataclysmic climate change, the long years of a religious

war, a king's rule, a civilization's demise and regeneration, or a terrible pattern resounding through family generations.

Contrasting Examples

Look at these two passages (from a draft of mine). The first is conventional:

Jason's father was always hard on him. From earliest childhood, Jason knew this was what to expect. It was almost a family tradition.

The second is an expansion:

Patriarchal discipline was ingrained into the very fabric of the family. It had gone on for generations and didn't break for holidays, births, funerals or world wars. It always got transmitted in torturous exactness from father to son to son—and even to sons-in-law (by some bonded osmotic process) as men married into the family. None of the children could escape, and this oppressive mantle was now being passed to Jason.

What Expansion Is...and Isn't

Can you see from these examples how expansion differs from typical exposition? Both establish necessary grounding, but the expanded dimension is wider. In Jason's family, no child can escape. The design is larger. In Jason's family, the discipline is passed down through the generations.

The range is also more courageous than the customary background. You are asked to push beyond the accepted rules of the short story—and you may land at the edge of a novel. In the second Jason example, following the expansion an entire chapter could easily be devoted to Jason's great-grandfather's mode of discipline and its influence on each family member. Another chapter could describe Jason's grandfather as father, and a third could trace Jason's father, finally introducing Jason. But in a short story, you don't have the luxury of chapters for each scenario.

On the other hand, expansion isn't mere rambling or lazy writing. Let's say that in the second example above, instead of continuing with Jason, you talked about his two sisters and how they were (or weren't) disciplined. This would be straying from the promised focus—Jason.

When to Expand

Expansion is appropriate when you want to give your story—or your main character’s struggles or conflicts—a context larger than what readers (and editors and agents) generally expect from short fiction. I wanted to show that Jason was not only up against his father’s habitual actions but also had to struggle with the strength of successive generations of disciplinarians. As Jason begins to question his father’s authority and power, the opening expansion shows us that Jason’s victory is that much more profound.

Let’s consider five steps you can take to discover, create, manage, and integrate effective expansion into your short stories. With examples from well-known stories, these steps are expanding in relation to your story, transitioning smoothly, deciding on the scope of your expansion, expanding concisely, and expanding successfully.

Expand in Relation to Your Story

Expansion can begin either at the opening of your story or several paragraphs into it. The successful expansion must relate precisely to the heart of your story. It’s easy to get carried away with a grand scene, say, a lush description of war-torn years, but readers will recognize the self-indulgence of a sweep that doesn’t specifically connect to your protagonist and the main conflict.

In “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson starts her classic and bone-chilling story with a conventional opening, in this case immediate action. On a balmy summer day, the citizens of a typically pleasant small town gather as if at a county fair. We’re introduced to the townsfolk by name as the men exchange sage words about the crops and weather, the women gossip, and the boys collect smooth stones, as boys will, and play boisterously.[1]

But then, in the fourth paragraph, we’re given the first real indication of the day’s sinister nature. The townsfolk aren’t preparing for a county fair after all but instead for a macabre ritual—involving those apparently innocent stones—as old as the village.

Now Jackson expands with the history of the lottery’s focal point, the “black box”:

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even

before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. . . . There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. . . . The black box grew shabbier each year: By now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

This precise and detailed account emphasizes the centrality of the black box to the ancient, outdated rite that is still mandatory and very much alive. With this background established as context for the events of the story, Jackson quickly refocuses on the present. We watch the citizens take their turns drawing slips of paper from the box, to the story's final horrific end.

Transition Smoothly

Your expansion requires a smooth introduction and will later need a graceful exit. When your story starts with a sweep, obviously a transition to introduce it isn't needed. But, as in Jackson, when the expansion takes place a few paragraphs into the story, we must watch its entry and departure. If the transition is too abrupt, the expansion will seem contrived. In "The Lottery," Jackson positions the sweep artfully, setting the scene with the day's action and slowly, with carefully planted descriptions, segues into the expansion.

Here's the sentence immediately before the expansion and its first sentence, as quoted earlier:

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it. The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago

Just as skillfully, in a kind of sandwich with the same characters, after the box's history Jackson picks up the story's action. Notice her almost exact repetition of the words as in the expansion. Here's the last line of the sweep and the next of the story:

The black box grew shabbier each year: By now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained. Mr. Martin and his

oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the papers thoroughly with his hand.

Jackson uses the expansion here and the minute, repetitive detail before and after it to elongate the action, heighten the tension, and rivet our attention.

So, we can think of the extension as embedded in smaller details. From the narrower action or narrative, the scene expands naturally and then contracts again back to the main focus, and the story's forward motion.

Decide on the Scope of Your Expansion

Once you've worked out your transitions, decide how long to stay in the expansion. Test it by expanding or reining it in. My story "Casey"[2] centers on an adolescent boy who's sure he's a loser. At the start of an early draft, I described how the teachers ignored Casey and lavished attention on his nemesis, Clive, the perfect student. In the process, I got fired up about why the teachers responded so strongly to Clive. This is some of the original passage:

Clive was the student they were sure would still appear, even after years of slogging through grade books and writing parents never-delivered notes. Clive was the student who made worthwhile their initial desire to become a teacher, even when they were all but drowning in mountains of paperwork and endless staff meetings and seriously considering quitting two years before retirement, not caring any more about sacrificing their pension.

After several drafts, I saw that this story could easily veer off into the plight of frustrated teachers, and with an added diatribe about the educational system. So (with great regret) I cut out a thousand words and reduced the "teacher" passage to two paragraphs that centered on Clive. Here's the revised version:

Like his mother, Casey's teachers seemed to look on Clive as almost a religious figure. Through the dark years of blank-faced children, their faces blurred with stupid sameness, Clive appeared, a comet in the black. Casey saw how the teachers' faces lit up when Clive raised his hand, how they called on him too quickly, knowing they'd be saved from the class' incipient noisy rebellion and embarrassing visit from the principal.

Expand Concisely

Even a brief expansion, done well, can evoke just the span of the story you envision. Science-fiction and fantasy writers are known for their opening sweeps—time continuums, light years, far galaxies, alien species. Here is Ray Bradbury’s masterful opening weep in “All Summer in a Day”[3]:

It had been raining for seven years; thousands upon thousands of days compounded and filled from one end to the other with rain, with the drum and gush of water, with the sweet crystal fall of showers and the concussion of storms so heavy they were tidal waves coming over the islands. A thousand forests had been crushed under the rain and grown up a thousand times to be crushed again. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a raining world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

Such an expansion instantly involves us, intrigues us, and conveys the flavor of the story.

Extending Success

Deciding on the length of your expansion is largely a matter of aesthetic judgment and distance. First, write your heart out. Then obey an essential rule of good writing: Let it sit. You’ll gain perspective on how well your story is working. Walk away, forget it, bury it under your novel-in-progress, go clean out the garage, and come back, finally, to your story.

If the expansion now seems too short, you may not have given enough context for the main character’s later actions. If the expansion is too long, readers may lose patience or become confused about your point, as in my pre-excised “Casey” draft. Listen to your writerly intuition and correct the draft.

You can also test the expansion by showing your story to someone you trust and watching for responses. If you see a suddenly furrowed brow (too short) or hear suppressed sighs or outright yawns (too long), you have your answer.

Supports to Help You Expand Your Scope

These eight suggestions will help you reduce any lingering fears and guide you into expansive writing adventures.

1. Decide once and for all that you don't have to be bound by the standard definitions, limitations, or confines imposed on the short story.
2. Give yourself permission to think and visualize on a broader, larger scale.
3. Think about the "history" of your characters—their family, their living situation, the events that surround them, their country, era, planet, personal growth (or lack of it).
4. Ask yourself, *Why do I want my characters in a larger context?* (If the answer is that you don't, you have no need for expansion in this particular story.)
5. Ask yourself, *How will the expansive context make more dramatic, poignant, or meaningful my story's theme, conflict, or resolution?*
6. Visualize a movie camera panning toward the main action of your story. You're the director. Where will you first focus your lens?
7. Now, write what comes to you, censoring nothing, whatever the length.
8. Let it sit, then go back to it, and start editing.

Understanding the expansion frees you from limiting your stories to single circumscribed subjects and extends your repertoire of narrative techniques. Observe how other writers use expansion. With familiarity, you won't rule out any subject, scene, or setting as too big or broad. Your work will gain breadth and richness you may not have thought possible in the short story form. And you'll attract more readers eager for your next short story.

ENDNOTES

[1] Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery," *The Lottery: And Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). Also available online at *Twenty Great American Short Stories*. Edited by Aaron R. Ezis, www.americanliterature.com/SS/SSINDX.HTML. All quotations are from this edition.

[2] Noelle Sterne, "Casey," *Star Stepping* science fiction/fantasy anthology. Culver City, CA: Wild Child Publishing, 2008, pp. 95-113.

[3] Ray Bradbury, "All Summer in a Day," online at INFO<http://www.intermed.it/bradbury/Allsummer.htm>. Also available in *A Medicine for Melancholy and Other Stories* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

© 2015 Noelle Sterne



© 2015 *The Write Place at the Write Time*
This online magazine and all the content contained therein is copyrighted.