

Stages of a Fiction Writer

A tool to self-assess where you are along the road

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Introduction

The following information appeared originally in slightly different form in two posts at [The New Daily Journal \(TNDJ\)](#). This information is for private self-evaluation only. It is not intended to sound harsh, only honest. I respect serious writers too much to pull a punch that needs to be thrown.

Note: I will never make a judgment regarding which “stage” you’re in as a fiction writer, so please don’t ask. That’s up to you to determine.

In a recent comment, a reader noted that I sometimes mention the “stages” of a fiction writer in TNDJ posts. She also noted I have mentioned that I consider myself a “Stage 4” fiction writer and asked whether I have a list of traits that typify those stages.

To give credit where credit is due, I first heard of The Stages of a Fiction Writer through a series of posts years ago on Dean Wesley Smith’s website.

I agree with some of his assertions, but not all. I’m also not big on labels, but I found his Stages a good guide for self-assessing my own skill level at the moment and determining what I still needed to learn.

At the end of this document I’ll tell you how to find Dean’s posts on the topic.

What follows is my own take on the stages based on my personal experience as a prolific fiction writer and as a copyeditor over the years. You will probably note that some of these traits are fluid, moving from one stage to another. You will also note that some of the traits repeat. This is only a general guideline.

Am I qualified? Only you can be the judge of that. But over a period of 8 years I have written roughly half as much as my unintentional mentor wrote over his 40+ year career.

Stage 1 Writers

despite their protestations, aren't really aware of potential readers at all. To be fair, they don't know they aren't aware, and most believe they are.

- Their sole focus is on the typing and on following the “rules” of writing (the myths).
- They believe there is a complex formula for success, and that if they stack this story component on that one and then place another one next to those in a particular sequence, they will succeed.
- They are dependent-on and seek approval and validation from agents, editors, and publishers (i.e., people who don't write fiction).
- Some melodramatically complain about writing being a “solitary endeavor” while simultaneously believing it takes a team to write a story or novel (agent, editor, beta readers, critique groups, etc.). (*Hint: The fundamental component necessary for success in writing is believing in yourself.*)
- They fret over individual words and individual sentences, and over making the sentences grammatically correct.
- Many might spend hours (or days!) in an attempt to make a single sentence or paragraph “perfect.”
- They also still believe each paragraph should cover a “topic,” as they were taught it should in school.
- Many have no clue how to wield punctuation like a maestro's baton to direct the reading their work.
- They have no concept of Story except as something to be constructed from component parts. (I call this Construction from Deconstruction, or writing from a critic's point of view..)
- They have no concept of the nuances of language or the nuances of fiction writing, i.e., how the “components” of a story flow and mix and intermix.
- They see the components of fiction as blocks to be connected and stacked, but they are unable to sense the interconnection, the flow of one component into and through the other.

I should add that none of this is their fault. We've all been there. Like all of us, they were mostly taught by people who do not write fiction.

Most school teachers who DO write fiction, even seriously, are stuck in Stage 2. Few if any get beyond Stage 3. (Yes, Stephen King was a teacher for awhile. He was also a very notable exception. Now, name another one.)

Stage 2 Writers

are beginning to consider or worry about Story and Characters and POV, but

- Their focus is still largely on typing, grammar, individual words, and individual sentences.
- And perfection.
- They still aren't aware of potential readers, so they aren't even close to realizing that what is "perfect" to one reader is terrible to another.
- Most are still bound solidly to the myths and believe revisions and rewrites and editing and content critiques by other writers and "polishing" (all functions of the critical mind) will help or improve a story. (***Hint: It won't. It will make the story worse.***)
- Many Stage 2 writers still melodramatically complain about writing being a "solitary endeavor" while simultaneously (and erroneously) believing it takes a team to write a story or novel (agent, editor, beta readers, critique groups, etc.).
- Some will actually say they have learned enough and stop seeking new knowledge re the craft of fiction writing.

Note: The openings critiques I offer have nothing to do with content. They concern only the inclusion and arrangement of that content. Imagine that: I might actually respect your characters and their story more than you do.

Stage 2 writers are in transition from the first stage to the third stage. But unfortunately many will remain in Stage 2, trapped in the comfort and "safety" of the myths. (Seriously, safety from what? There are zero real-world consequences to writing a story you or others deem "bad" or to failing entirely as a writer and finding something else to do.)

A few of those Stage 2 writers, primarily due to their own or their contacts' skill in marketing or sheer good luck, are bestselling authors. Go figure.

My advice?

- If you want to make a steady income, get or keep your day job.
- If you want to make a lot of money, make good investments.
- If you want to write great fiction, read on. (And maybe grab a copy of [Writing Better Fiction](#). It literally contains everything you need to know to write great fiction.)

Stage 3 Writers

are becoming increasingly aware of Story and Characters and readers.

- They have a tenuous grasp of POV and they have begun to notice and wonder about Pacing and more.
- A few still melodramatically complain about writing being a “solitary endeavor” while simultaneously believing it takes a team to write a story or novel (agent, editor, beta readers, critique groups, etc.).
- They have also begun to understand that words and sentences are only tools. By the time they reach the end of Stage 3, they are so focused on story they often no longer notice the individual words or sentences.
- As they advance through this stage and learn more about critical mind vs. creative subconscious, they leave critique groups behind.
- As they advance through this stage and learn more about reader-opinion (one is as good as another) they leave beta readers behind. (Note: A good first reader is not a “beta reader” and offers no opinion on content.)
- They seldom revise except in the creative subconscious (cycling) and they almost never rewrite.
- As they advance through this stage and gain personal confidence, they leave rewriting behind.
- Some will still actually say they have learned enough and stop seeking new knowledge re the craft of fiction writing. (Yes, this is a repeated trait.) As a result, they become stuck in Stage 3 and never advance.
- Again, a few of these writers, primarily due to their own or their contacts’ skill in marketing or sheer good luck, are bestselling authors. Go figure.

Depending on how much the Stage 3 writer practices (puts new words on the page), learns and publishes, s/he might stay in Stage 3 for a year to several years.

Many writers never advance beyond Stage Three, but they still know a great deal more craft than those who are stuck in Stage 2.

Most fiction writers are in Stage 1, Stage 2, or Stage 3. To my never-ending chagrin, most of those doling out advice on “writer boards” and in other social media are Stage 1 writers.

You can learn absolutely nothing of value about fiction writing from them. And most of those who visit those venues regularly are Stage 1 or Stage 2 writers.

Stage 4 Writers

are in complete control of the words and sentences and paragraphs. For them, words are literally only tools to be used or discarded. Stage 4 writers

- know POV and how and when to switch it skillfully.
- are patient and know the characters will reveal themselves over time (just as actual humans do).
- know (and most often can innately sense) Pacing.
- understand the Story is the characters' story, not theirs, that they are only the vessel through which the story is delivered.
- trust their characters and the story completely.
- are always on guard against critical voice, and they are mostly in control of it.

Despite all of the above, especially early in Stage 4, sometimes some writers still fear, within themselves, the story isn't quite as good as it could be. But they still don't allow themselves to conduct a critical-mind revision, rewrite, or edit as a Stage 3 writer might.

Stage 4 writers also

- understand their initial role as Observer/Recorder is non-intrusive, but only to present what happens in the story in real time, and that
- their role as Writer is only to present the story to maximum effect for the greatest number of readers. They
- don't think about or fret over whether a story is "perfect" BUT
- fully understand that what one reader (even the writer him- or herself) likes or loves another might enjoy or dislike, and they couldn't care less.
- They do their best at their current skill level to present the story. Then they fuggedaboutit and move on to the next story.

The Stage 4 writer is not only completely aware of the reader, but is in control of the reader's reading experience through the manipulation of words, sentences, punctuation, paragraphs, character, POV, setting, scene, and pacing.

Of greatest importance to the Stage 4 writer is

- (as the Observer/Recorder) to faithfully record the authentic story—what actually happened and the characters' reactions as s/he ran through the story with the characters—and
- (as the Writer) to present the story as well as s/he can at his or her current skill level to the reader.

There you go. That's my take on the stages of a fiction writer. I hope it helps some of you determine your own level of craft and encourages you to continue learning.

My Own Experience with the Stages

Today I am a Stage 4 writer, probably at about a medium level. I've mastered a lot of the craft—with the caveat that a big part of “mastery” is understanding there's always more to learn even about techniques you already “know.”

Fortunately, I was blessed with a strong will and discipline early in life. Then, at the ripe old age of 61, I was doubly blessed to stumble across Heinlein's Rules and Writing Into the Dark.

Once I decided to give WITD a real try—primarily to prove to myself that it wouldn't work—I found to my never-ending surprise and delight that it does.

So I further **dedicated** myself to Heinlein's Rules, WITD, and to quieting and pushing-down the critical voice.

I also **committed** myself to a firm daily word count goal (I strongly recommend this) of 3000 new, publishable words of fiction per day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year.

Once I started writing fiction in earnest in April 2014, that discipline and hard-headedness enabled me to progress through Stages 1–3 in about six years. Working through Stages 1 and 2 took only a few months, during which I wrote only short stories.

But “dedicated” and “committed” are the key words to all of this.

Again, with very few exceptions, I wrote every day (probably at least 350 days per year). And on most of those days I met or exceeded my daily word count goal of 3000 publishable words of fiction per day.

On some days, those 3000 words went into a short story. On other days, they finished one story and started another, or a novel. On other days they went into a novel, or ended one and started another.

What you write, the individual story or novel, is not important in the slightest. THAT you write is all-important. You know, if you're a fiction writer.

But remember, with much of my life behind me, I had the time available to me to spend 3 or 4 hours per day (minimum) writing. Your results may vary.

We all have only so many disposable hours in a day. But if you want to be a fiction writer, I continue to believe it's important to write every day, even if for only a half-hour. And keep track on a spreadsheet or in some other way. It all builds up.

Far more importantly, I made writing fiction my number one priority.

Some will consider that a mistake. I do not. Remember, **THAT** you write is important. **WHAT** you write, the individual story or novel, doesn't matter in the slightest. And my number two priority was learning more about the craft.

(Disclaimer re my priorities: Of course, writing fiction was only my number 1 priority when the house was not on fire just outside my office door and when a close relative was not seriously ill, etc. As always, your priorities might differ. Just remember they are yours to set. No one else can set them for you unless you allow them to do so.)

As a result of that discipline, I put out a lot of new stories, novellas, and novels. In between stories, I also continued to learn Craft by taking pertinent workshops and lectures (mostly from Dean), and by voraciously reading the works of Stage 4 writers and those of Hemingway and King and Lawrence Block, whom I consider Stage 5 writers.

The Stage 5 Writer

Dean Wesley Smith does not include Stage 5 writers in his assessment of this topic. That is his assessment, and that's fine.

A Stage 5 writer is one who has mastered every aspect in Stage 4 and is still learning, albeit only the nuances of what he's already mastered.

Your experience might differ, but in my case, had I not made the absolute commitment to Heinlein's Rules and WITD, I would not be where I am today as a fiction writer.

I understand that not everyone has the time available to them to follow the formula above. But no matter your age, your day job, your family or other commitments, you can set your own priorities and you can commit to Heinlein's Rules and writing into the dark.

- **Awareness is everything.** And once you are aware
- **Practice is everything.**

Practice, of course, means putting new words on the page.

Then you strive to become aware of something else. Or not.

It really is all up to you.

To see Dean Wesley Smith's take

on the Stages of a Fiction writer, click deanwesleymith.com/. Then click the little magnifying glass search icon to the right of the menu on his site.

Then key "stages of a fiction writer" into the box and hit the Enter key on your keyboard. Dean's posts on the topic will pop up.

When they do, scroll down and read to your heart's content. But frankly, I think you'll get more out of reading and rereading this document.