The Five Most Common Problems in High School Fiction and
How to Solve Them

1. Cardboard Characters

Too many inexperienced fiction writers tend to focus on filling their stories with action without taking the time to develop three-dimensional characters to give the plot life.

When we spot cardboard characters in the first draft of a short story, we need to point out this weakness and suggest a remedy. Here are a few.

a.   Use a character profile worksheet like the one at
http://kayedacus.files.wordpress.com/2007/06/character-profile-worksheet.pdf
to add depth to a one-dimensional character by filling in the questionnaire and incorporating some of the information generated from this imagination exercise into the next draft of the story. After you fill out the profile sheet, you may need to write a biographical sketch of the character based on your answers from the worksheet.

b.   Take thinly developed characters out of the original plot, put them into a totally different situation, and do some free-writing about these characters to learn more about who they are by how they react in this new set of circumstances. For example, if the hero in an action/adventure story suddenly finds himself a paraplegic getting around in a wheelchair instead of on a motorcycle, how does he react?

c.   Be sure express character in a variety of ways. Some direct description is permissible, but if that is your only method for developing a character, the story will be peopled with cardboard characters. Here are some other options: dialogue, thoughts, minor actions, major actions, reactions to other characters, and physical appearance, gestures, looks, clothing, hair style, jewelry, tattoos, etc. All of these things suggest character.

d.   Point out that predictable characters are based on stereotypes that writers and readers have in their collective understanding of human nature. To give life to one-dimensional characters, students need to break down these stereotypes by giving their characters some surprising qualities. For example, the captain of the wrestling team may suck his thumb when he=s nervous, or the prom queen may have a secret passion for violent video games.

e.   If you sense that you are paying too much attention to minor characters and not enough to the major ones, try rank ordering the characters; and give the

characters at the top of the list the attention they deserve.

    f.   If you have artistic ability, try drawing or painting a portrait of a thinly developed character. Doing so will force you to make some decisions about personality.

    g.   Once you have given life to characters, you should let them go where they will; that is, let them be faithful to who they are, reacting in ways consistent with the personality, beliefs, dreams, and flaws that have been established early on in the story. Liberating characters can help writers solve plotting problems as the story unfolds.

2. Predictable Plots

When readers can easily sense what will happen next in a story, that story loses its power; and readers lose interest. Readers like to worry about what will happen next. High school students often find it difficult to develop a story idea in original ways so that the typical reader will wonder what's around the next turn in the story. Here are some remedies for salvaging plots that have become too predictable.

    a.   One way to involve readers in the plot from the beginning of the story is to begin with a question. By planting a key question in the minds of readers, a question that will be answered near the end of the story, writers give their readers a reason to keep turning those pages. Writers who build their plots around a dominant story question for readers to worry about also keep themselves on track because it becomes their responsibility as plot builders to answer that question. In "A New Day Dawning," published in the 1998 volume of *Writers' Ink*, Casey Goudy introduces her story in this manner; she makes her readers wonder if Paul will return safely from his trip to America. Then she goes on to tell her story as an answer to that question.

    b.   Don't forget the difference between the story line and the plot. The story line is everything that would happen in real life if the story were true. The plot is the writer's choice of which events from the story line to reveal to readers and the order in which to reveal them. Suspense is created when writers do not reveal everything in the story line. This requires readers to guess what's going on behind the scenes. In other words, good writers do not tell everything they know. Heather Killingsworth strategically withholds information to create an interesting plot in "The Case of a Kidnapping" (*Writers' Ink* 2000, p. 20).

    c.   Use an unreliable narrator. The narrator is the writer's choice of who tells the story, and this choice can have a big effect on plot predictability. If the readers

sense early on that the narrator cannot be trusted to tell the truth, they are automatically thrown off balance and must wonder where the story is going. If the narrator is dishonest, delusional, simple-minded, or too young to interpret what goes on in an adult world, the plot can take interesting twists. Brandon Foster uses this approach to advantage in "A Runaway Imagination" (*Writers' Ink* 1999, p. 24).

d. Use foreshadowing to build suspense. When writers leave subtle hints of what may happen around the next bend in the plot, anticipation builds in readers; and they want to keep turning those pages. First drafts that fail to create this kind of anticipation can be revived through the use of foreshadowing. Scott Ryan uses this effectively in "The Modernization of Dracula" (*Writers' Ink* 1998, p. 9).

3. Excessive Exposition

Another common problem that appears in high school fiction writing is too much telling and not enough showing. If we define *exposition* as the author's directly communicating background information to the readers to help them understand the story, then exposition in moderation does not hurt a story; but when writers directly explain everything without letting the characters act out the story, readers become bored. Here are some options to exposition that high school writers can use effectively.

a. Narration. Letting an informed character relate the story from his or her point of view creates interest that the distant, omniscient voice of the author cannot generate. Besides giving readers an "insider's" perspective, this technique gives the story a sense of realism. Jacob Chesier uses first person narration effectively in "Ol' Bullwinkle" (*Writer'Ink* 1999, p. 25).

b. Dialogue. Using dialogue to move the plot along creates interest because it takes the story away from the narrator at least temporarily and gives it to two or more characters who advance the plot as they talk to each other. This adds realism and develops the characters in an interesting way, assuming that the dialogue sounds natural. Erin Camp uses this technique effectively in her story, "Change of Heart" *(Writers' Ink* 2000, p. 29).

c. Action. When the writer simply reports what happens and lets the reader draw his own conclusions about background, characters, and setting, readers become more actively involved in the story. This is Courtney Parker's dominant tool in "The Long Road" (*Writers' Ink* 1999, p. 29).

4. Boring Beginnings

As in life, we only have one chance to make a first impression in a piece of short fiction. Too much high school fiction assumes the reader needs little or no encouragement to read past the first paragraph; but in reality if the beginning of the story does not grab the average reader, then it's a lost cause. Too much background, character/setting description, or do-nothing dialogue can discourage readers. Here are some antidotes for the boring beginning.

a.   Begin with conflict. The story starts when the main character's life is disrupted. If the writer takes too long to arrive at this conflict, the reader loses interest. The western writer's advice to "Shoot the sheriff on the first page" holds true for any story. Casey Goudy wastes no time in getting to the conflict in "Hunting" (*Writers' Ink* 1999, p. 28).

b.   Begin with an interesting character. By nature, people are curious about other people, and confronting them in the first line or paragraph with an intriguing character is a good hook. Trey Schultz uses this in "Last Cast" (*Writers' Ink* 2000, p. 8).

c.   Begin with a strong desire. If the focus of your story is an unmet need, ambition, or revenge, let the main character express that emotion at the outset. This creates a tension between what is and what should be and gives readers a way to buy in to the story. Jacob Chesier uses this kind of opening in "Experiencing a Dream" *(Writers' Ink* 1998, p. 17).

d.   Begin with a suggestive setting. Beyond the "It was a dark and stormy night" cliché, this strategy works well if the setting plays an integral part in the lives of the characters whom the writer is about to introduce. When a vivid image of a landscape, building, geographic region, etc. creates an appropriate, suggestive stage upon which the characters can begin dealing with the dominant conflict in the story, then this kind of opening can be powerful. Amber Jackson uses this approach in "The Race" (*Writer'= Ink* 1999, p. 14). Alexis Sayers also uses this in "Rediscovered Lives" (*Writers= Ink* 2000, p. 7).

e.   Begin with dialogue. Letting readers "overhear" characters talking with other draws them into the drama right away. Used effectively, dialogue can also be used to bring the other elements above: conflict, character, desire, and setting, to the forefront. Kristin Roberson uses this strategy in "Their Secret Garden" (*Writers= Ink* 2000, p. 25).

5. Easy Endings

      Too often high school students write themselves into a corner and have trouble delivering an effective end to the story. They close abruptly, illogically, too conveniently, or so indefinitely that readers wish they had not invested their time in the story. The *deus ex machina* device may have worked in ancient Greek theater, but sophisticated readers want more. The it-was-all-a-dream ending will not satisfy most readers either. A good ending actually has its roots in a good beginning. If student writers will plan their stories so that the groundwork for the ending is firmly laid early in the story, readers are much more likely to buy in to whatever closing the writer uses. If the protagonist suddenly changes his behavior at the end of the story as a means of resolving the story's conflict without the proper groundwork being laid, then this sudden change will seem out of character and hard to believe.

a.   Outlining. Students who have trouble with endings should outline their stories before writing a first draft. This forces them to look ahead and to prepare readers for what=s coming. Seeing the skeleton of the story on paper or the computer screen will help student writers evaluate how well their proposed ending creates a sense of closure. Outlining also forces student writers to consider their options, i.e. how the story=s conflict may be resolved in ways consistent with the characters and the other elements of the story.

b.   Character Analysis. Students who take the time to develop three-dimensional characters get to know them well enough that they are more likely to write endings consistent with these characters= personalities, philosophies, and previous actions. (See 1.a. above.)

c.   Brainstorming with classmates. Sometimes students need to have a preliminary audience on whom they can test ideas for credibility. Small group brainstorming sessions will help some students find the right closing for their not-fully-born stories.