



Writing Hurts
Like Hell:
Writing Sex, Foul
Language,
Violence and Humor

Writing Violence

Violence Is A Part of Life

We live in a violent world. It's a part of life. Animals die violently in nature to feed other animals. We walk across a beautiful bed of grass—and squash the life out of ants and other insects that were busily going about their lives thinking, “I'm so happy to be doing this.” And then ... crush. They're gone. We may not have intended violence, but tell that to the bugs.

Violence, like the characters in your stories, is more complex than it may appear on the surface.

You have to ask yourself: Why did that person commit that act of violence?

No human is a single person. We're all each of the people we've always been, when we were children, when we were teenagers, when we were young adults, when we were middle aged, and when we're old. We carry around with us all those people we've ever been—all the fears, all the joy, the anger and the love. Most of us deal with these things over time and manage to bring all those people into a balance that allows us to function. Some of us never quite find that balance and this can cause us to act in ways that surprise us. We might suddenly snap at someone for no reason, or we might overreact to some little thing that goes wrong. We have no idea where this comes from. It could be from problems in our everyday lives, or it could be from some long unresolved hurt in our childhood, still festering and calling out for resolution in our adult lives.

It's this richness of experience and the emotional impact it has on us for our entire lives that makes every person complex and multi-dimensional. No one person is completely bad and no one person is completely good. If you have a character in your story who is completely evil with no redeeming characteristics, then you have a piece of cardboard. Even a psychotic personality may have a deep fondness for chocolate ice cream. Adolf Hitler played a game with his general staff. When one of them saw a man with a beard, they yelled, “Beard!” The one who saw the most number of beards won. This man who caused the death of millions of men, women and children had a sense of play.

An experiment performed in a US school in which students were to re-enact the rise of Nazism as part of a history project got so far out of hand in just a few weeks that most of the students had to undergo extensive counseling. In a matter of days, normal children were converted to fascism.

We're all a mixture of many personalities, but we all have two sides—a dark side and a light side. Most of us manage to stay within the bounds of the light side, but the dark is always there. As writers, we have to accept both sides. We may not agree with some of

the things that our characters do, and we might not like them if we were to meet them on the street or at a party, but we have to *accept* them for both their good and their bad.

It starts by loving our characters, unequivocally. If we love them enough to create them in the first place, then we have the responsibility of loving them enough to go the whole course and give them life. We show the good in bad people and the bad in good people. We keep it balanced.

If you have a violent character, don't let the violence just hang there. **Show where it comes from.** You have the breadth of story-telling in a novel to do that. Sometimes, just the mention of a scar that the character rubs after committing an act of violence may suggest something deeper and give some understanding or meaning to the violence or the character. Sometimes, you can do this through back-stories that track back to an incident in the character's life that feeds violent behavior throughout their lives.

Violence: Physical and Emotional

Violence is not always physical. Emotional violence can be just as destructive and sometimes even more so than physical violence.

I was in the checkout at a grocery store one day when I heard a man a few aisles down call his wife a fucking bitch. They had three children with them. He told her how useless she was and called her a fucking bitch several times. Everyone could see that she was humiliated and close to tears. It wasn't a big jump to assume that this is what she lived with every day.

Her husband might just as well have punched her in the face. Our bodies heal quickly from physical violence but emotional violence lingers inside us and punches us in the face moment-by-moment, day after day. It eats at our souls and strips us of our pride and self-worth.

Show Both Sides

Whenever you can, try to show both sides of the act of violence in both the victim and perpetrator, if only through subtle things like the expression in the characters' eyes. You might describe fear or pain in the eyes of the violent person, while the victim, though seeming to cower, has eyes glowing with resistance.

As for the man in the store, I'm guessing that someone in his past probably called him every name in the book and treated him like an animal. Though this doesn't excuse his behavior, showing the origins of the violent behavior in your writing will make your characters more believable.

Violence Pointers

Never throw gratuitous violence into your stories. Violence is a part of life and therefore has meaning in life. It comes from your characters; treat it with all the respect you give to the people you're creating. **Show where the violence comes from.**

Don't overdo it. You don't have to describe every physical blow or every hurtful word. Focus more on the effect it has on your characters.

Make your violence reveal character, not obscure it.

EXERCISES

You're a child in a playground. The school bully comes after you, insults you and slaps you in the face. If you do anything to defend or protect yourself, the bully will beat the living daylights out of you. Write about your thoughts as this is happening, right from the moment you see the bully heading toward you, through the taunting ("Hey, ya four-eyed runt," etc.), and finally to being slapped in the face.

OR

Write about a man or a woman punching another man or a woman in the face, over and over. Get inside the person doing the punching. Write only about what's going on inside the head of the person doing the punching. You can state it explicitly or you can hint at it ... but try to show where the anger and violence are coming from.

OR

If you have time, do both exercises.

Writing Humor

The Basic Absurdity of All Things

All humor arises out of the basic absurdity of life. Let's look at life. We're born. We flourish. Or ... we don't flourish. Then we die. It's an absurd concept. We're given this beautiful gift called life...just to have it taken away from us. For no reason. Even if we're really good and never kill a fly. Eventually, we die. It all ends.

It's absurd.

How do we deal with it? Some people turn to religion and see it as just the first step toward a higher life. Some people get drunk and speed up the process. Some people smoke and really speed up the process. Some people try not to think about it. Some people take a philosophical view and say, "It forces me to value every moment of my life ... because the moments will end."

Some people recognize the absurdity of the whole thing and laugh at it. That's us. We're the ones who laugh at it. And we're the ones who want to make others laugh at it.

What Is Humor?

"Humor is the product of a surprise ending applied to a normal situation, and the more unusual the surprise ending, the more intense will be the humor." Jim Foreman in "How to Write Humor"

"You take a woman walking down the sidewalk . Show the audience a banana peel in front of her. Everyone knows that she is going step on the banana peel and do a pratfall. At the last instant, she sees the banana peel, steps over it and falls into an open manhole that neither she nor the audience knew was there." Charlie Chaplin

My Definition of Humor

Humor is that which lifts the spirit. If you can make someone let go of the basic absurdity of life, make him or her forget about bills, work, the dishes piling in the sink, a pulled muscle—all the basic heaviness of living life day-by-day...then you've created humor.

You don't have to make them laugh until they puke. All you have to do is lift their spirits. Make them laugh to themselves, make them smile, make them forget about the mundane for an instant—give them a bit of breathing space.

In a nutshell: *Humor is anything that lifts the spirit in such a way as to say, "Yeah, it's all so very serious...but not right now."*

NOTE: Comedy is a whole different animal. In comedy, you need to make them laugh, especially before a live audience.

Seeing Humor All Around Us

The potential for humor is all around us. It lies just under the surface of everything we see **in the way we see it**. One of the best ways to explore this is to go through pictures and look for alternate realities to what you see.

The trick is to let your imagination run wild and not be constricted by what you see. Very little in life is what it appears to be. You can see a photo of two people embracing for a picture and they look like the happiest couple on earth. But she might be thinking, "Right after this, I'm going to tell him about John." He might be thinking, "Right after this, I'm going to tell her about Marsha." The situation under the surface of appearance is humorous and ironic.

Writing Captions

A great way to develop a sense of drawing the humor out of everyday things is to write humorous captions for pictures you find in magazines, newspapers, and brochures. If you really want to get into it...go to the family photo albums.

Study the picture. Let's say it's an image of four executives posing in front of award they've just received for successful campaign. All four are smiling and looking confident. This is the surface, what everyone sees.

Now, add though balloons with captions like: "Oh God...who farted?" "I'm going to fire you, Jacobs...I know your farts a mile away." Oh shit, Harry's going to fire me for this."

What the viewer sees in the photo is the exact opposite of what's really happening, and what's really happening is humorous (if you're not one of the people in the photo).

EXERCISE

Go through a magazine and tear out three or four pictures. They could be advertisements, pictures that accompany articles...anything that shows people. Look at each picture and ask yourself: What's the opposite of what's happening in this photo? Write captions based on your conclusion.

The humor doesn't always come from something that's the opposite of what's happening in the photo. It could just be something unlikely, something you wouldn't normally expect.

Exaggeration and the Absurd

Exaggeration and the absurd are the most common forms of humor and are sometimes impossible to tell apart. You take something mundane like a sign on the road with a picture of a deer. The deer almost looks like it's dancing. Up the road, you see an actual deer—and it's dancing. Not only that, it's wearing a ballet dress and tights. Further up the road, you see several deer dancing. Some are doing ballet, some are doing the tango. Still further along, you see dozens of deer dancing, then hundreds—ballet, rumba, flamenco, tango, twist, 2-stop. They're in the woods, on the roadside and on the road. You have to stop your car and watch while they dance. After a while, they dance away into the woods and everything is quiet. As you start to drive forward, you see a sign that shows a moose. It looks like the moose has a grenade launcher.

The whole point with exaggeration and the absurd is to let yourself go—no restraints. Forget about what's possible and what's not possible. Make it possible, without any explanation. People will suspend their credibility gaps for a laugh. Don't say, "This is stupid. I'm not doing it." Instead, do it because it's stupid. While you're in the first draft writing phase of exaggeration, nobody will see how stupid you are. You can edit later to hide the true nature of your stupidity. Remember, nobody has ever gone to jail, lost their job, lost their marriage, or been laughed at for something they've written. Unless they were caught.

EXERCISE

Write down a word or sentence and then start exaggerating it, going from mundane to increasingly absurd things. Keep in mind the deer sign on the road and the steady progression of impossible things, each more absurd than the previous.

It Builds Over Time

Do these exercises whenever you get a chance. The more you do them over time, the better you'll get. And then when you're writing, you'll be more likely to identify places in your stories where humor is appropriate and you'll be ready to write that humor.

Writing Sex

Sex can be the most magical thing in the world and it can be the ugliest, but it's the most intimate form of communication between two people, whether the communication is about love or about terror.

It can say wonderful things about your characters and it can say terrible things about them.

Sex should never be gratuitous in your stories—it should be used to **reveal character** in the people who populate your literary landscape.

Sex Should Reveal Character

The way we have sex reveals how we feel about life, about other people and about ourselves, and the way your characters have sex will depend on how well you know them. If your characters are real, when you put them in the sack with another human being, they'll have sex the way they would in real life.

Get into the minds of your characters while they're having sex. Exploring the interplay of thought between two people in the throes of ecstasy (or boredom) can be a brilliant source of humor, drama, or irony.

For instance, the interplay between a woman and man on a one-night stand—and they both know it. He's saying "I love you" to a woman he met an hour ago. During hurried and awkward sex, he's thinking: "Let's get this over with so I can put another notch on my conquest meter." She's thinking: "Let's get this over because I haven't been laid in a month and I need this, but I also have to get up for work tomorrow."

If your character is violent and self-absorbed make sex with that person something painful and unfulfilling for the partner (unless, of course, the partner is someone who gets off on violent and self-absorbed lovers).

One of the best examples of this is the movie *American Psycho*. In one scene, the lead character (a self-centered sociopath) is having sex with two women. His room is lined with mirrors and he's watching himself during the entire sex act. He's basically using the women to masturbate on fantasies of himself. One of the women has to be hospitalized. It wasn't a joyful thing for her. This scene says more about the lead character's complete lack of feeling for other human beings than the scenes in which he brutally kills them.

At the other side of the spectrum, don't have a prudish character suddenly having torrid sex unless you're going for humor, or you've set the character up for this with the occasional erotic daydream or a quick flash in the character's eye when a member of the

opposite sex walks in, and the flash reveals something stirring inside, like a repressed sexual dynamo waiting to be loosened.

I remember watching pornographic movies with the guys in college. For the most part everyone laughed. Your sex scenes should make people think or understand, not laugh (unless you're writing comedy). If the sex in your stories isn't saying something about your characters, then it's gratuitous, and possibly pornographic, or maybe it's just boring.

The key to writing about sex is to not force it. Let it flow through you from the characters you've created. And don't be afraid to experiment. If something seems a little over the top or perverse, but that's the direction your writing is taking, go with it. You can always edit later. On the other hand, you may have found that you've written something beautiful, even if perversely beautiful.

EXERCISE

Write a two-paragraph description of two people having sex. Use only their thoughts, no physical description (i.e. the bed, the room, etc.) unless it's coming from the thoughts of the character.

How Much Sex Should Your Character's Have?

How much sex is right? That's completely up to you and your characters. They might be able to get through a 400 page novel without once having sex, or as in Susan DiPlacido's steamy chic lit novel, *24/7*, they might not be able to get through four pages without sex.

If you find yourself putting a lot of sex into your first draft, keep it there for the time being. You can edit out the gratuitous stuff later, asking yourself, does this make sense? Is this real? Is this what these people would do?

Again, let the sex come from the characters you've created. If you've done your work on them before you started writing, then trust them to have the kind of sex they want to have. Don't try to manipulate them. Write mindlessly, following the feelings your characters invoke in you. The sex they have may change them. Let them change.

In this light, if you're writing erotic fiction, make sure your characters are erotic. Build them around their sexuality. Give background to their sexuality. Give the reader flashbacks to their first sexual acts. Give the reader their daydreams and fantasies and then make those daydreams and fantasies come true.

But also give them lives outside their sex lives. Make them real people in every facet of their lives and then put real people into the sack with them.

Do this, and two or three chapters into your book, your characters will let you know how much sex they should have.

How Do You Balance Sex Between Pornography and Eroticism?

Sex scenes don't have to be graphic with descriptions of wildly flailing bodies and graphic close-ups of genitalia. If the sex is violent, you might describe bruises and grunts and facial expressions more than sexual contact. If the sex is humorous, you might focus most of your description on props like clothing, condoms or a leaky waterbed. You might even describe anything but the people. The entire scene can unfold as the description of a flower blooming, incorporating the sensual movement of petals as they tighten and then unwind and finally burst into color.

However, if you're writing erotica, you'll want your sex scenes to be more explicit. But erotica is not pornography, and two bodies just pounding away at each other without any kind of build-up or reason isn't going to create great eroticism. You need to arouse your reader. You need to give your reader a little literary foreplay, getting into the minds of your characters and exploring their wants and expectations.

Pornography turns people into sex machines, indulging in sex for no other reason than to go through the motions. In fact, pornography dehumanizes people to the point where they become little more than plastic sex dolls. It's demeaning to both parties.

Erotica gets into the minds and bodies of your characters and makes your readers feel what they're feeling. It's a beautiful exploration, and if you can incorporate the rich experience of your character's life into the act of sex like Joyce does, then you'll be giving your readers a glimpse into your characters' souls.

Romance, is generally much less explicit, with the focus on love or a relationship built on much more than sex.

Exercise

Write one paragraph of pornography. Then turn it into one paragraph of erotica. Then turn your paragraph of erotica into an act of love. Review former student, Jed Alton's, piece before attempting this.

Exercise by Jed Alton

Pornography

His fingers clutched my hair and jerked my head back as he brought his face close to mine. "You want this bitch, don't you?" he hissed in my ear "Tell me you want it. Beg me you fuckin' whore and maybe I'll drive this cock deep inside you. You've got a juicy, heat

seeking pussy there that's dying to suck the life out of this cock." He shoved me back on the unmade bed and grabbing my legs by the knees he yanked me to the very edge of the bed, my legs spread wide and my naked body totally exposed to his. I could see his angry cock, swollen and red with one drop of cum clinging to the very tip, waiting to lubricate whatever got in it's way. His left hand reached down and spread the lips of my cunt open, exposing my quivering clit. With his right hand he grasped the shaft of his cock and guided it onto my clit where he began sliding it up and down until my clit was bone hard and I was moaning and thrusting mindlessly. The feel of his silky skin stretched tightly over that wonderful hardness was creating an animal within me as his cock continued to tease and frustrate my agonized clit

Eroticism

He backed me slowly up against the wall. I could feel his body heat wash over me in waves. There was barely an inch between our bodies. His arms were supporting him against the wall on either side of me creating an enclosure around me. My heart was pounding and excitement and tension were mounting within me. My face was burning as a flush washed over me. His strength and maleness were intoxicating to me. My breathing had become shallow and fast and I felt my body heating up with sexual tension. His right leg shifted slightly positioning between my legs and he began applying pressure, forcing my two legs apart. His firm, muscular leg was now applying a steady, gentle pressure to my crotch and I suddenly felt the strength in my legs give out. My body was surrendering to him. It seemed to have a will of it's own and it wanted to be conquered. Every nerve was straining for attention and seeking to find an explosive and violent release.

Romance

Gentle kisses, barely touching his skin. Kisses that felt like feathers being slowly trailed over his face, down his neck onto his breast. Kisses that found his nipples hard and continued their journey down the center of his heaving chest, stopping just below his belly button and lingering there, playfully teasing and promising more... but not yet. Gentle kisses on his toes, between his toes and culminating with sucking and licking of his toes then slowly working up his legs. Kisses that travel lightly over his sensitive skin and force moans to escape from his tortured body. Kisses that tease and frustrate every inch of his legs as they draw closer and closer to their ultimate destination, the alter of love, the center of his universe. Kisses that gently brush against the underside of his balls then climb to the base of his penis. Kisses that blank out the entire universe and demand total concentration, total surrender and total obedience. Kisses that make his earth shudder, lights explode and angels sing, louder, and louder, higher and higher and finally scream until there is no more sound able to come out. Gentle kisses that soothe his tortured body and comfort him with love. Gentle kisses, barely touching his skin.

Writing Strong Language

Sometimes, People Swear

I've known people who would never dream of saying "damn" and then lose it completely and say "fuck" over and over. Sometimes, a deep breath just doesn't do the trick. I've known people who just barely communicated because the amount of foul language coming out of their mouths almost obscured what they were saying.

But whether they never swear, or can't stop swearing, you need to convey the sense of language your characters use and it has to be realistic.

Nothing describes your characters as **accurately** as the language they use. A large burly man dressed in rags is walking toward you on the sidewalk. Ten feet away, his eyes meet yours and hold there. You think, oh no, and get ready to say, "Sorry, I don't have any change." When he's just a few feet away, he smiles and says, "Beautiful day."

The words we use and how we use them say more about us than the clothes we wear and, often, how our faces and bodies look. Language is how we express our thoughts and feelings. It defines us more than anything else.

I remember reading stories about the a language immersion class in which high school students who could speak French only were put into an environment in which they were not allowed to speak their native language and had to speak English only...even though they were just learning English. When they first ran the program, there were situations where students had nervous breakdowns, made suicide attempts or dropped out of the program because they couldn't handle the stress. The problem was that they defined themselves and their reality so deeply through their language that, when they weren't allowed to speak it, their personalities began to dissolve.

If you put all the love, commitment and work into creating real characters in your stories—characters who are believable and surprising—then you have to go the whole distance and let them talk the way they will.

In children's books, family books, and religious books, the language is going to be toned down, not because teenagers, seven year olds and priests don't swear, but because your characters are created for a very specific audience and they represent the *ideal* type of person in your reading audience. This is the way you've created them. They'll take the road less foul-mouthed. On the other hand, you might want to change the rules and give the audience something new. Make sure you have a thick hide and a day job before attempting this outside the home.

I know very few people who don't swear at one time or another. We use strong language when we're mad, when we're disappointed, when we're reaching orgasm, when we're trying to insult someone, when we crush our thumbs with a hammer, when we're surprised, when we're frightened, when we're...

It goes on. And many of these times are appropriate for strong language. The same holds true in your stories. You use language that's appropriate for the situation and *for your character in that situation*. One woman might say, "Damn!" when she burns herself on the barbeque. Another might say, "Fuck!"

Don't Under-do It

Don't have a big burly biker saying "Oh fudge!" when he comes back to his Harley and sees that somebody's taken a knife to his custom paint job.

Don't censor your characters' language with **F***! and c--- and &!!&%%\$#@**!** You can use this kind notation to write non-fiction, but don't use it in your fiction. Real people don't speak in stars, dashes and ampersands. If you use this kind of technique, you take your readers out of the fictional world that you've made so real for them with your blood-and-soul characters and force them to focus on the fact that all they're doing is reading a make-believe story.

Let your characters talk the way they *will* talk without censoring them and your readers will stay in the world you've created.

Sometimes beginning writers are shy about using the word fuck. Don't be. It's old hat these days. Used appropriately, it neither startles nor offends. Used appropriately, it can deliberately startle or offend. It's that versatile. Use it for effect, and use it to define your characters. Does your character say "I fucked so and so ..." or "I slept with so and so ..."? Both statements say the same thing, but they suggest different attitudes toward sex.

The word cunt— considered almost mandatory in some British movies and books—is still pretty much verboten in most mainstream North American writing, which is exactly why it can be a powerful character definer when it's used appropriately. Want to learn more about this word? Watch the Vagina Monologues with Eve Ensler.

But Don't Overdo It

I used to work as a bartender. One night a customer came to my bar and started talking to me about the rough time he and his brother had experienced earlier in the day moving a large couch down a narrow stairway. I'll quote just a small part: "The fucking thing was fucking too fucking big for the fucking stairway and we fucking had to fucking take the fucking legs off ..." This is exactly the way he talked for 10 minutes. Would I use this in

a story about him exactly as is? Nope...and not because I'd be concerned about my gentle readers' ears, or consider it too gross. This is exactly how he talked. But I'd still delete a few of the "fuckings" and then read it out loud until I was satisfied I'd captured his tone. This kind of extreme overuse of a word is just as distracting as taking twenty pages to describe a setting for a scene that lasts for one page. The verbal expletive barrage focuses the readers attention on just one thing, the word, and loses a lot of the meaning of the conversation and the delineation of character in the process. This is where the writer as editor comes in and recreates reality in his or her likeness and strips away the extraneous detail that distracts from the story the same way F*** and Sh--! would.

Write Mindlessly and Go Right Over the Top in Your First Draft

When it comes to language, don't let an image of your future readers, an image of your parents, children or a favorite teacher looking over your back, or your own sense of what's right or wrong for yourself stop you from letting your characters use the kind of language that's appropriate for them. A man saying to his wife, "You fucking bitch" draws a truer picture of a disturbed personality than the passive description: "And then, in front of everyone, Jack verbally abused Sally."

Write without editing and write fast and furiously, putting in every foul expletive that you think might surge through the dialogue and the narration. Come back to it later and edit out the stuff that you feel is too far over the top, distracting, inappropriate for your reading audience, or just not right for that particular character.

If you've done your work in creating your characters, go the rest of the distance and let them talk the way they will.

EXERCISE

As a person, you may not like certain language and you may never use it. As a writer, you do what your characters demand (I'm open for argument on this). This exercise is designed to break the ice between you and strong language.

Write the word that you think is the most repellent word you can think of twenty times. Then write just once, the word you think is the exact opposite.

Now, read everything out loud, preferably with someone else present.

About the Author



Biff Mitchell is bald and has no idea how to use his cell phone. In spite of this he's been teaching writing workshops through the University of New Brunswick's College of Extended Learning for the last decade. He's also given workshops on science fiction, humor, mystery, horror and publishing through the Maritime Writer's Workshop, the FogLit Literary Festival, Culture Days Canada and the Muse Online Writers Conference...all this in addition to working full-time creating online learning for a quarter of a century.

Biff has managed to trick publishing companies and magazine editors into publishing several novels, numerous short stories and novellas, and even some poetry. Poetry. A few years ago, his ebook *eMarketing Tools for Writers, 2nd Edition* was a bestseller in the business section of Fictionwise for over a year, and get this...he's a regular contributor to the award winning Twisted Tails anthologies from Double Dragon Publishing.

Biff is also a world famous photographer in his daydreams and has taken a few passable pictures that he displays on his photography website biffmitchellvisuals.com.

You can learn more about Biff at biffmitchell.com.

Publications

Novels

Boston Jonson in Murder by Burger

Boston Jonson in Murder by Art
Boston Jonson in Murder by Coffee
The War Bug
The Reality Wars
Heavy Load (a laundromance)
Team Player

Short Stories

Lots

Articles

Lots

Poems

Some

Non-fiction Books

eMarketing Tools for Writers, 2nd Edition (out of print)
Writing Hurts Like Hell: How to Write a Novel When You Don't Have Time to Write a Short Story