

How to make your writing exciting by Beatrice Colin.

I was once given a book by a student about a girl who went into a dangerous forest to seek out a magic ring. So far so good. But she wasn't alone. Her father came along too and our young heroine spent much of the book sitting under a tree watching her father fight off trolls and monsters. Why, I asked the writer, did you put in the father? It would have been too dangerous for her to go alone, the writer replied. Needless to say, the book was about as exciting as watching your dad cut the hedge.

Did Little Red Riding Hood bring her mum? Did Rapunzel have a mobile phone? Did Charlie ever get told by his dentist to cut down on chocolate? No, no and no again. Characters in stories can do all the things that we would/could never do. They can run away from home, time travel, sail with pirates, do magic, live inside a giant peach, avoid tooth decay.

But once you decide that you want to write a story, how do you make it exciting? How do you plot the story so that your readers can't put it down?

1. Make life as difficult as possible for your hero/heroine at the start. This means that they have no back-up, no parents, no lifts, no pocket money, no lovely big bedroom with their own TV. The broom cupboard? That's more like it. It's no co-incidence that so many characters in children's fiction are orphans or have wicked stepmothers. If they were too comfortable they wouldn't feel the urge to go anywhere or do anything.
2. Give them a task, something they must pursue. This can be anything from saving the world to finding out who killed their parents. It must be difficult but not impossible. We learn about characters by what they do. While we're tucked up warm in bed our characters go out and do all the things that we're too scared/sensible/comfortable to ever consider.
3. Make terrible things happen to them. If they are on a boat, they get hit by a storm. If they are on a train it gets stuck on a bridge. At night. If they are in disguise, their wig falls off just as the bad guys are passing. Your job as a writer is to make the worst thing you can think of happen to your characters and then work out how they get out alive. Also, each terrible thing must be slightly worse than the previous terrible thing. How bad can it be? Surprise yourself! It's fine to not know how your story is going to go until you start writing. Making it up as you go along is part of the fun.
4. To make the plot really crack along borrow a trick from Hollywood and alternate the good and the bad. For example, your hero falls out of a plane (bad) but he a parachute (good). It doesn't open (bad) but his fall is broken by a huge tree (good). He starts to climb down but comes face to face with a huge snake (bad). Next time you watch a film you'll spot this. At the most exciting parts of your book write in short, sharp sentences to quicken the pace. For example: The water was far below. Still as glass. The car screeched to a halt. He closed his eyes. The doors opened. He held his breath. Freeze, a voice cried. He fell.
5. Near the end put your characters in a place where getting what they want is seemingly impossible. This is the point where in real life we would give up, cry, call the police, phone home. But if you ended your story here, your reader would never forgive you and so our hero/heroine must choose to stay and fight the

monster/rescue the dog/conquer the dark side/eat their way out of the sweetie factory.

Beatrice Colin has written two books for children, *Pirate's Boy* and *My Invisible Sister*, which was adapted by Disney in 2015 as *Invisible Sister*. Her new book for adults, *To Capture What We Cannot Keep* will be published in February 2017 by Allen and Unwin. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Strathclyde.