

Writing secrets of the

By William Kowalski

ABOUT 2,300 years ago, the rules of storytelling were laid down by a man who was, at least according to legend, the last person to know everything. He was a philosopher and scientist, as well as a student of Plato. Today, the name of Aristotle is synonymous with scientific and philosophical brilliance. But did you know that he was an expert on writing as well? In his incomplete work *The Poetics*, Aristotle set forth several simple rules to help aspiring authors achieve that celebrated Greek ideal: perfection.

The novel was unknown in ancient Greece, but Aristotle was well-versed in the most popular form of entertainment of his time: the play. He was not, as far as we know, a playwright himself. But he applied to the theater the same spirit of inquiry and examination that he showed in all subjects. Soon enough, he noticed that successful plays had certain things in common.

Not only are most of Aristotle's rules still applicable to contemporary fiction, drama and screenwriting, but many of them are even marketed by modern so-called "story experts" as their own. These people would have you believe that their wisdom comes from many years of experience and analysis, but in fact the elements of storytelling have been known for millennia. You can save yourself a lot of time—as well as workshop fees—by going closer to the source yourself.

Following are just a few gems from a vast treasure trove that, as part of our cultural heritage, is free for the taking. These five observations are as relevant to writers today as they were when Aristotle first wrote them.

1 All stories are made up of five elements: setting, character, plot, dialogue and thought. By "thought," Aristotle meant something like a character's motivation or intention. (He also included a category for melody, which dealt with the music that accompanied plays.) When these elements are combined in their proper proportions, the effect is to create a work of a pleasing wholeness—a great story. And in order to achieve those proportions, the elements had also to occupy their rightful place, for some categories are more important than others. A story that emphasized setting over plot, for example, simply would not work. Why not? That brings us to our next point:

2 Plot is everything. "The first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of a story, is the plot," Aristotle wrote. People have paid vast sums to be told what this son of a Thracian doctor has been trying to tell us for free all this time: We can forgive a good

story badly told, but not a bad story wrapped in flowery prose.

3 Characters come second. After plot, the next important question is: Who are the actors? For a character to work, Aristotle wrote, four aspects must be developed.

- First, she must be "good," which means not that she is a nun or a Girl Scout, but that she possesses some innate, redeeming quality that wins the respect of your readers.
- Second, she must be "appropriate"—that is, her various qualities must make sense, based on her identity. For example, a serving girl should not live in a mansion, and a queen should not be washing dishes.
- The third quality is that she must be "believable," or realistic; we have to believe that she could exist, even though we know it's a work of the imagination.
- The fourth quality is consistency. A character should not be stark raving mad on one page and utterly sane on the next.

WORKOUT

ASK YOURSELF how your current work holds up to the standards discussed in the article. For example:

1. Are each of the five elements of your story present in their proper proportions? Is your plot being overwhelmed by other elements?
2. Is your plot clear and easy to express in no more than two or three sentences? Here's a way to answer this question and have fun at the same time: Grab your significant other or a good friend and tell him to pretend he is an editor. Walk into the room and pitch your story in no more than 30

seconds. This isn't about hard sales; it's about being clear and concise. It's excellent practice, by the way, for the moment when you will have to do this for real.

3. Is your protagonist sympathetic, appropriate, believable, consistent?
4. Does your story contain an interesting discovery or two, and does a reversal then arise from them?
5. Remember, as always, rules were made to be broken. When you break them by accident, that's amateurism. When you break them on purpose, that's style.

—W.K.

ancient Greeks

What Aristotle
can teach us about
fiction

4 Keep your readers hooked by making use of reversals. Reversals (Aristotle called them “peripeties”) happen when things in your story change from one state to its opposite. Two examples: A wedding feast (a happy event) is marred by the sudden death of the bride’s father (a sad one); a baby is born (a joyous occasion) in the middle of a hurricane (a disaster).

5 Another way to hook readers is to use discoveries. By discoveries, Aristotle meant those moments when your hero learns something, either about himself or one of the other characters, which has an impact on the direction of the story. We might think of these today as simple plot twists. But there is really nothing simple about plot twists, at least not when done well. They are at their most effective when they fulfill a certain set of expectations. Aristotle would caution us against throwing some bizarre kink into our narrative just for the sake of being outrageous, because this is not good storytelling.

“The finest form of discovery is attended by peripety,” he wrote. In other words, it’s most satisfying to your readers when a reversal arises directly out of a discovery. Here’s one example from a play that most of us had to read in high school, and which is contemporary with Aristotle himself: *Oedipus the King*.

When Oedipus learns that the woman he has married and had children with is in fact his mother—a discovery—this is the cause of his reversal from happiness to misery. This new state, in turn, leads to his eventual self-mutilation and exile.

Imagine how much less effective the story of *Oedipus the King*, which Aristotle considered the finest tragedy ever written, would have been had the hero never learned the truth about his mother. Or, imagine if his blindness had arisen from some other cause—a war or a

disease, for example. Would those elements of the story still have the same dramatic impact if one did not come from the other?

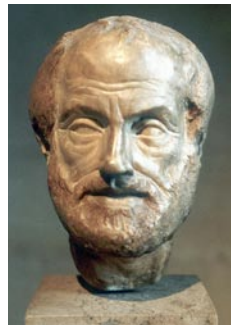
Why else are discoveries and reversals important? Because they help provide the broad emotional range that spells the difference between average fiction and great literature. The best stories don’t just explore one feeling, but cover the gamut of human emotion.

And, while we’re on the topic, what is the difference between fiction and literature? The former merely entertains; the latter has the power to remind us of our common humanity, and even change lives.

6 The perfect plot is simple, not complex.

Anyone who has spent months working on a story only to be that there was too much happening will appreciate this one. In our attempts to create stories that readers find interesting, we often can err too far on the side of caution by stringing together incident after incident, until we have a theoretically endless chain of cause and effect. How is one to know how much is enough? Our old toga-wearing friend had an answer for that one, too.

“The plot should be so framed that, even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them shall be filled with emotion at the incidents,” Aristotle tells us. Think for a moment of your favorite novels or movies. How easy is it for you to explain to someone else what they’re about? Most likely, your answer is “Very.” As my own editor at HarperCollins told me many times, if you can’t explain the gist of your story in two or three sentences at most, then it’s not ready yet.



Aristotle analyzed successful storytelling.

So, what is the best way for modern writers to incorporate Aristotle’s advice? The most helpful approach would be to discuss the points I’ve described with your writing group. Aristotle is much easier to read when you have people to talk him over with—and he’s worth the effort. Or get a copy of *The Poetics* for yourself and read it. Do you see ways his points can be used to help improve your own work?

By the way, was it smooth sailing once our ancient student of writing achieved the goal of all literary hopefuls—publication, or in the case of dramatists, production? Not quite. “Because there have been poets before him strong in the several species of tragedy, the critics now expect the [writer] to surpass each one of his predecessors,” Aristotle intones.

In other words, 25 centuries ago, authors were already awaiting their reviews with butterflies in their stomachs. Some things never change.

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William Kowalski is an award-winning novelist and screenwriter. *Lovely to the Last*, his screenplay co-written with director Markus Griesshammer, is currently in production.

RESOURCES

THERE ARE a variety of translations of *Poetics* available in bookstores and online. For this article, I used the Modern Library’s *Introduction to Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon and published by Random House (1947). Regardless of which translation you choose, I also recommend using a study guide; get some leads by Googling “Aristotle’s Poetics+study guide.”