**Surprise & Delight Your Readers on Every Page**

by Jessica Strawser

*Try these techniques—from the big picture to the line level—to write more compulsively readable stories (any genre, any length) that bridge the gap between literary & commercial.*

**OUT OF CHARACTER BEHAVIOR**

***Consider: The moment a character acts OUT of character …***

*is the moment we stop being distantly interested in the plot and start being intensely curious about the people driving it.*

**Out-of-character behavior raises the question: “But why?” And that keeps us reading.**

**For protagonists, antagonists, and your supporting cast, ask yourself:**

* Who in your story is too regimented, predictable, archetypal, or flat?
* What about your protagonist is *too* good? What about your antagonist is *too* bad?
* Whose shift might turn out to be a *good* surprise for the protagonist (Act 3)?
* Whose shift might turn out to be a *bad* surprise for your protagonist (any act)?

**This technique will work *only if* your character h**as enough character established that we know what is *in* character for this person—and if you set up a great payoff.

**EXERCISE: Characterizing in a Line or Two, Part 1:**

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**EXERCISE: Characterizing in a Line or Two, Part 2:**

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**WALK-ONS, CAMEOS & MINOR CHARACTERS**

It can be easier to surprise & delight with someone we weren’t expecting to see. Who might:

• Add comic relief & color

• Diversify perspectives

• Mess up plans

• Make someone’s day

• Be delightfully relatable

**PLOT: HEIGHTENING TENSION**

PRO TIP from Jane Cleland’s *Mastering Suspense, Structure & Plot*: Try to get a TRD on every page: • **T**wist (unexpected) • **R**eversal (opposite of expected) • Moments of Heightened **D**anger

*“Write the fast stuff slow and the slow stuff fast.” —Lee Child*

**TWISTS & REVERSALS**

“That’s what … any good novelist should do with you: play with your perceptions while showing you everything in plain sight.” —Harlan Coben

EXERCISE: PHOTO PROMPT 1

EXERCISE: PHOTO PROMPT 2

**THEME: QUOTABLE INSIGHTS & UNIVERSALS**

*Reading = research. Look for the below, & you’ll find universal insights & thematic takeaways:*

• “Most highlighted” passages in Kindle editions and digital library loans.

• Reader-submitted highlights under “quotes” on a book’s Goodreads page.

**WAKE UP YOUR DIALOGUE**

**Add Instant Tension:** Tell an unexpected truth. Or, tell an irretractable lie.

EXERCISE: PLATITUDE WORD PLAY

**YOUR PROCESS: ON SURPRISING YOURSELF:** “If you outline…you end up with a book that’s pretty logical, but not very surprising. …Write characters who are bits of shades of gray, so we don’t know exactly where they’re going to go.” —Lisa Gardner