



TERESA'S QUICK FICTION CHECKLIST

On Where to Begin

1. **Are you using scene to set up your story?**
 - Resist the urge to start your book with back story, flashback, or flowery descriptions.
 - Drop us down in the middle of an engaging scene.

2. **Have you introduced us to an interesting character?**
 - Attach us to an interesting character right from the start.
 - Make this character your main character or a secondary character who has something to say about your main character.
 - Draw your main character in such a way that we *have* to know who this person is.
 - Consider giving your character someone to interact with in your opening. Two bodies make for a more interesting scene.

3. **Have you given us any conflict?**
 - The opening of your book should introduce us to conflict. If we don't get a strong sense that something is coming, we'll read no further.
 - If your conflict is external, let us see the bullets fly.
 - If your conflict is internal, let us see your character tie herself up in knots.
 - Don't tease us about the conflict by merely hinting that something big *might* be coming.

4. **Are you using your very best writing?**
 - Hook us with good writing. We won't read past the first paragraph if you don't.
 - Plan on rewriting your first chapter more often than any other in the book. It's your most important chapter.

5. **Have you established time and place?**
 - Give us some idea where the story is taking place and what time period we are in.
 - Don't just drop in the date; let your dialogue or a news event or a description of clothing give us a hint.

CHOOSING A POINT OF VIEW

1. Do you even have a point of view?

- If we don't know whose voice will be leading us through your story, we'll feel lost. If we feel lost, we'll lose interest.
- Trust your POV characters. Let them tell the story. Don't dump random information in the middle of your narrative or switch POV characters mid-stream.

2. Have you chosen the right POV character?

- The point-of-view character should be the one who stands to undergo the most change in your story, the one who is going to learn the most.
- Your POV character doesn't have to be the "big character." Say you want to write about Buffalo Bill, you might consider telling his story from the perspective of a boy who travels with him in the Wild West Show. That boy is then your POV character. We're going to see Buffalo Bill through his eyes.

3. Have you chosen the right POV?

- Ask yourself how intimate you want your story to be.
- For sweeping stories where you want to be able to show all sides, try third person point of view.
- To show a big event through the eyes of a character who moves around within that event, try the limited third person POV.
- Avoid omniscient POV unless you absolutely *have* to be able to get into any character's head or unless you need to be able to make observations as the narrator.
- Second person POV is nearly impossible to pull off in a novel-length work. Avoid it all together.

4. Are you using the right tense?

- Tense and POV often go hand in hand. If your story isn't coming together, try changing the tense from present to past or past to present.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

1. Do you know your character well enough to tell his story?

- Have you thought through all sides of your character?
- Have you done a character sketch or a rough outline to see where his story is going?
- If you don't know what your character *wants*, you can't throw obstacles in her way to keep her from getting it. If you have no obstacles, you have no story.

2. Do you have the right name, age, and gender for your character?

- Are you trying to make your character something he's not? Does he *need* to be a middle-aged man, or should he be an older woman?
- If your character is not cooperating, she may have the wrong name. Try a different moniker and see if she comes together better.
- Is your character's name one that sits well with the reader? Even if you love the name, if readers have an association with that name, it may keep us from believing it fits your character. We'll have a hard time seeing any character named Oprah, for example, as anything other than the famous talk show host.

3. Do we have a picture of your character?

- Do we have at least a rudimentary description of your character?
- If your story is told in first person POV, find a better way to tell us what she looks like than having her look in a mirror.
- Have you used other character's comments or observations to show us your character?

4. Is your character unique?

- What sets him apart from the other characters?
- For your main characters, it should have something to do with the conflict in the story and their ability to deal with it.
- For secondary characters, it should be a way for us to see their purpose in the story and keep them separate from each other.

5. Is your villain well-defined?

- *Every* good story needs a villain (or villains).
- Villains can be human, alien, animal, elements of nature, disease, even war. You can use more than one in each story, but one should rise above the others.
- Remember that your villain can even be your POV character.

PLOT**1. Is your plot believable?**

- Whether you outline or not, think seriously about whether your plot can sustain a novel-length story.
- If you get halfway through the book and your plot falters, you probably didn't build in enough conflict from the start.
- If your plot starts to feel a little far-fetched, it probably *is*.
- Make sure your plot fits the world your character lives in.

2. Is your plot based too closely on fact or personal experience?

- Before you start a book like that, think about whether or not there's really enough *story* in that true event.
- If there's not enough story, can you add to the real event? It's fiction. You're allowed to do that.
- If your book is loosely based on one of your own experiences, make sure there are enough universal elements to keep us all interested.
- If your personal experience can't sustain a whole book, don't give up on it. Try writing it as a short story or a personal essay.

HOW TO WRITE A GOOD SCENE

1. Does your scene involve action?

- Do you have action—large or small—in every scene?
- Does every scene move your story forward?
- If your scene centers around character development or feels more internal, then make sure your character acts on what she just learned.

2. Does your scene have an agenda?

- There should be no gratuitous scenes in your books.
- Every scene you write should help to develop your story or your character.
- If a scene doesn't relate in some way to how he is going to maneuver his way to his end goals, it probably doesn't belong.

3. Are you using transitions effectively?

- Have you used transitions or are you expecting your reader to jump around in your story?
- Not all transitions need to be cliff hangers.
- When you do write a cliff hanger, don't manipulate your reader. Let it rise naturally from the scene itself and lead *logically* to the next page.
- Don't jar the reader by suggesting a twist that comes out of nowhere.

4. Are you using your five senses to make your scenes come alive?

- Are you using all five of your senses when you write?
- Avoid clichéd comparisons such as “her dress was as blue as the sky.”
- Draw on personal experience or interviews with someone who has real experience in a similar event to move your writing beyond cliché.

DIALOGUE

1. Does your dialogue sound natural?

- Does your dialogue sound *too* real? In real life, our speech is often circuitous and laden with “ums” and “ahs” and repetition. Don’t put your reader through that type of dialogue. Remove every unnecessary word.

2. Does your dialogue define character?

- Are you using what your character says to show us who he is?
- Are you using what others say about him to show us who he is?
- Is your character revealing his level of education, his prejudices, his opinions, and his moods in his speech?

3. Does your dialogue enhance your scenes?

- Is your dialogue creating mood within a scene?
- Is it bringing tension to your conflict scenes?
- Is it raising suspense in your story?
- Are you using it to reveal information that moves your story forward?

4. Are you going easy on slang and cuss words?

- Use expletives with purpose, not just for shock value.
- Use swearing to show how a character’s mood changes or what things tick him off.
- Use cuss words to show when the situation has become tense or dangerous.
- Not every character should swear in the same way or with the same frequency.
- Go easy on slang, too. A little goes a long way.
- If your dialogue is too laden with slang, you run the risk of sounding cliché. This is especially true with historical pieces.

5. Are you playing around with dialect and accents?

- Again, the key here is restraint.
- If your character speaks with an accent, show it through word choice, sentence structure, or grammatical mistakes.
- Intersperse the native tongue from time to time or remind us she speaks with an accent.
- Resist the urge to misspell words as shown here: “*pleez, ees eemportant.*”