

MONSTERS! INK!

LESSON TEN

MAKE YOUR STORY 'POP'!



So, you're working on your story and it's got a beginning, middle and an end, but it doesn't yet zing . . . You're still left asking, "So what else can I add to give my story more fun, more fizz, more pop, more pizzazz?"

What can you do? The solution is...plot twists and tension! Mistaken identities, sneaky plans, sleight of hand—it's all grand. Nothing keeps readers glued to the page like plot twists and cliffhangers. Few things make readers happier than a story that pulls the rug out from under them and shows them that their perception of the story up to that point is nowhere near as cool as the reality. But, by the

same token, few things annoy a reader more than a story that fools them and then laughs at them—or, worse, thinks it's fooled them when, really, it's only bored them.

Plot twists can bring a whole new dimension to your story. But done with less finesse than not, they can also submarine the whole thing. So, how do we successfully pull the rug out and add a little tension? Let's find out!

FEEL THE TENSION

You may want to do the following demonstration illustrated by Suzanne Linebarger, a co-director of the [Northern California Writing Project](#).



Rubber bands are a fabulous way to explain tension. As you hand them out, tell your students to leave the rubber bands on their desks. "Don't touch them." Of course, they are jittery waiting to get their hands on the bands and "accidentally" shoot them off. As they wait, take a large one and just dangle it on your finger. However, when you stretch it out and point it (not at a student), the rubber band suddenly becomes more interesting. It's the tension, the potential energy that rivets our attention. It's the same in their writing. Too often, students believe humor or fear are the only elements that make writing engaging. Tension is a much better place to start.

Tension is inherent in all learning experiences and throughout life. As Suzanne describes, "I tell my students that it's the tension, in my case terror, that keeps me skiing. I'm scared every time I push off and exultant every time I get to the bottom of the hill alive."

Life is full of tense situations! For example, you might talk with students about how hard it is to stay friends with even your best friend when we're met with a challenge.

Students might have times they had let their friends down and times they had been let down. They might talk about they managed to stay friends in spite of their problems. In other words, some tense situations! Tense doesn't mean negative! There's just an edge to the situation, or, in other words, the element of surprise.

A great way to demonstrate the use of tension to students is through children's literature. Look for tension and develop ways to bring it into your discussion of a piece. There are plenty of wonderful choices.

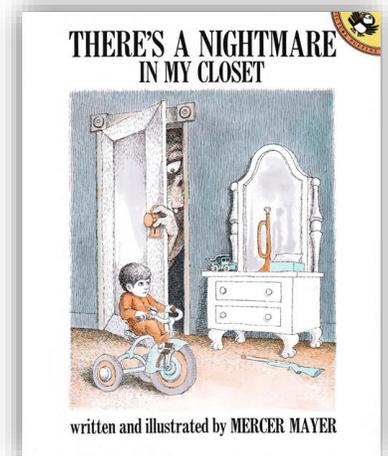
PICTURING THE TWIST!

Picture books are quick reads, lots of fun, and often gems of characterization, mood, and dialogue. They are also perfect for demonstrating to young writers how to organize plot logically and how to pull off a plot twist and what tension feels like.

In *Ira Sleeps Over*, by Bernard Waber, Ira wants to bring his teddy bear when he goes to spend the night at Reggie's house. His parents assure him that Reggie won't laugh. His sister says, "He'll laugh." The tension is set and all young writers get it. *The Wednesday Surprise*, by Eve Bunting, develops a secret between Grandma and Anna. Everyone believes that Grandma is babysitting, but the reality is that Anna is teaching her to read. The Mercer Mayer

TEACHER TIP

The classroom environment must be designed to support fluency. Students in every writing class constantly ask, "How much do we have to write?" The response to that question needs to be, "I won't tell you 'how much,' but I will tell you how long." Setting a timer allows the teacher to impose a limit on students' writing (even if it's his name over and over). This is one way to discourage the "I'm done" syndrome. Being done is not the goal; perseverance is.



classic, *There's a Nightmare in my Closet*, is a natural for any discussion of tension with writers of all ages.

Explore some of the following, or a few of your favorites, that have a great plot twist, and demonstrate tension, with your students. As you read them look for what they have in common. Ex. Not all the twists are sudden, but they will all be surprising in some way. As you read think aloud and model your thought process as a reader for students. What surprised you? What do you think might happen? Etc.

ADDITIONAL SAMPLES OF STORIES WITH FUN PLOT TWISTS & TENSION

Dear Vampa by Ross Collins: The Pires are cursed with new neighbors. Things were just fine on Nostfer Avenue until the Wolfsons arrived. There seems to be no end to the new family's strange rituals. They stay up all day long, lock their windows at night, and bathe—in sunshine. What's a nice vampire family to do? The fun story's carefully-laid clues culminate in a twist ending that will have young children clamouring for it to be re-read.

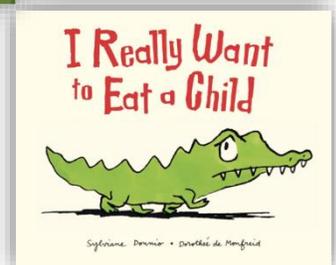
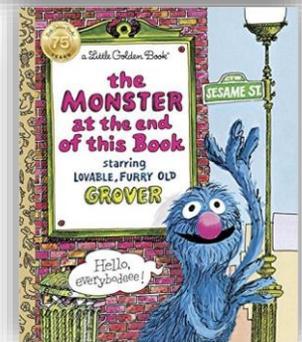
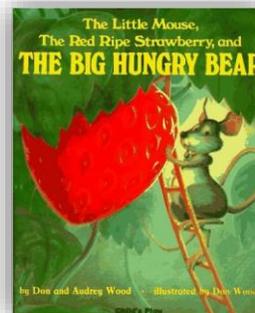
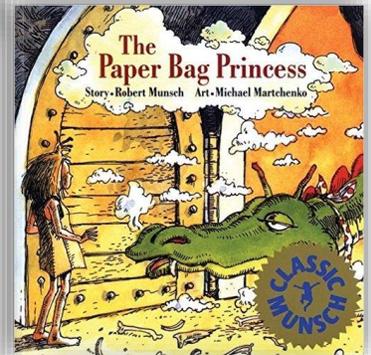
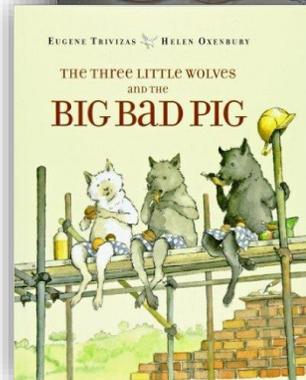
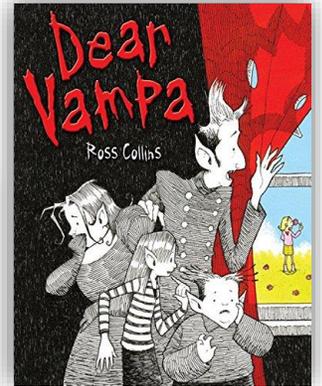
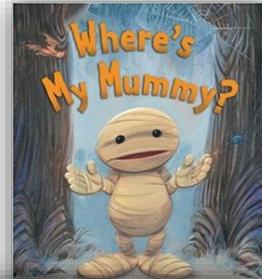
Where's My Mummy? by Carolyn Crimi Little Baby Mummy does not want to go to bed. Demanding one more game of "Hide and Shriek," he runs outside to conceal himself in the graveyard, but Mama Mummy doesn't join him. He sets off to find her, heading into "the deep, dark woods, the spookery woods" and encountering several creepy creatures...but what is it that will really spook our cute little mummy? And will Mama be there in time to help?

Saving Sweetness by Diane Stanley: The sheriff is bound and determined to rescue the little orphan, Sweetness, before she runs into that desperado, Coyote Pete. This story, with a traditional rising action plot, has lots of twists and turns and a humdinger of an ending.

The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch: One of the best princess stories ever told, Elizabeth turns the princess stereotype on its head.

I Really Want to Eat a Child by Donnio and De Monfreid: This crocodile . . . needs to eat *bananas* to get big and strong after all – not a child!

The Little Mouse, The Red Ripe Strawberry, and The Big Hungry Bear Note: Older kids will get the funny ending, but very young children may not quite understand yet.



The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig by Eugene Trivizas, and the classic, *There's a Monster at the End of This Book* by Jon Stone.

TO NAME JUST A FEW!

NOTE: FOR OLDER STUDENTS, WHILE PICTURE BOOKS WORK EQUALLY WELL FOR ALL AGES, THERE ARE ALSO 'SHORT STORIES' THAT DEMONSTRATE THE POWER OF A WELL-EXECUTED PLOT TWIST AND EXCELLENT USE OF TENSION SUCH AS THE FOLLOWING.

The Lottery | Shirley Jackson

A small town prepares for its annual ritual—a lottery—that is supposed to ensure a good harvest. [Read "The Lottery"](#)

The Necklace | Guy de Maupassant

A woman borrows an expensive necklace from a friend, but she loses it and works to set things right. [Read "The Necklace"](#)

The Last Leaf | O. Henry

A woman with pneumonia can see an ivy vine through her sickbed window. She counts down the leaves as they fall and tells her roommate that when the last one falls, the pneumonia will kill her. [Read "The Last Leaf"](#)

Charles | Shirley Jackson

A boy who just started kindergarten, Laurie, comes home everyday with stories of a classmate, Charles, who's disruptive, disobedient, and violent. Laurie's parents are concerned that Charles is a bad influence on their son. [Read "Charles"](#)

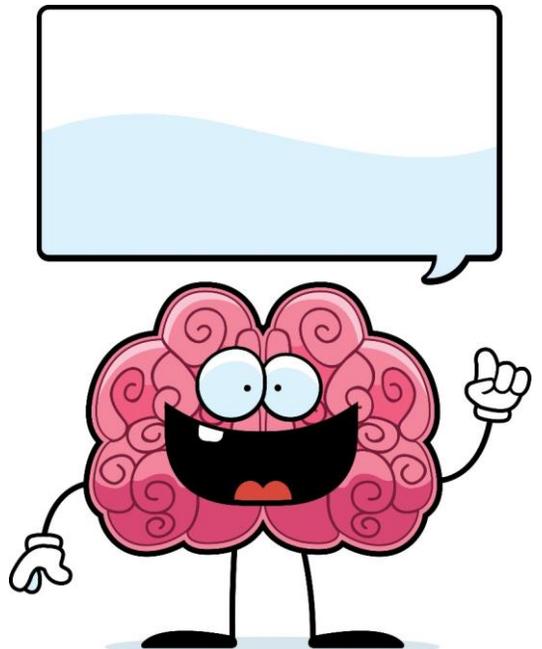
To Serve Man | Damon Knight

Earth is visited by an alien race, the Kanamit, who look like a cross between pigs and people. They have brought valuable knowledge for producing power, increasing food supply, and other things, at no charge. Some question the purity of their motives, but when the Kanamit are subjected to a lie-detector test, they pass. [Read "To Serve Man"](#)

AMONG MANY OTHERS!

THINK OUT LOUD!

As you read and explored, what did you like? What did you dislike about any of the twists? Did you see any commonalities between the stories? Could you see any of them coming? How? Did any catch



you completely by surprise? Did you see the clues after it was revealed? Did any of them give you any ideas for your own stories?

DON'T STOP! MAKE IT POP!



Have students brainstorm with their partners and write down at least 3-5 ideas for their own plot twists and tension makers for their monster story. Encourage them to be silly, daring, wild, odd, and imaginative! Practice, Practice, Practice! **Model this for students by coming up with plot twists for your own story and sharing several with the class!**

You can come up with your own twists by taking your basic plot idea and asking 'What if...?'. Then ask 'What if...?' again. Then ask "How could this get worse?" Keep going until you start coming up with a few out-of-the-box scenarios. It's when you keep pushing that you'll come up with the 'surprises' that the reader loves. It often takes several tries and attempts to clear out the stale ideas, over-used ideas, or ideas from other people and get the creative juices flowing on your own unique

ideas! **Twist then twist again (like you're playing with your gum!).** When you come up with your first 'twist' idea, keep tweaking it. Pull it this way, then that way, see how big of an idea bubble you can get!

You may wish to adjust the number required according to grade level and skill, but it's always best to require multiple options instead of settling on a single idea, no matter how brilliant that idea seems.

YOUR WRITE!

Now that we've discussed a bit more about plot and gathered a few mind-blowing plot twist ideas...it's time to twist and turn and churn out a plot with lots of thought! Keep working on writing the full action packed character driven story that will be your base for your 3D tale! Keep in mind, in your rough draft, you're just concentrating on getting it all on paper. You can go back and fix things later.



TEACHER TIP: HOT SPOTS!

Give students a hot-colored highlighter while they're drafting. Anytime they have to pause to guess how to spell believe or fascinating, or to wonder if they need a comma or if they should use "I" or "me," have them highlight that spot in the draft **and keep writing.** Later, when they're ready to consider mechanics, they go back to the "hot spots" and double-check their guesses with a dictionary, grammar handbook, or proofreading partner.

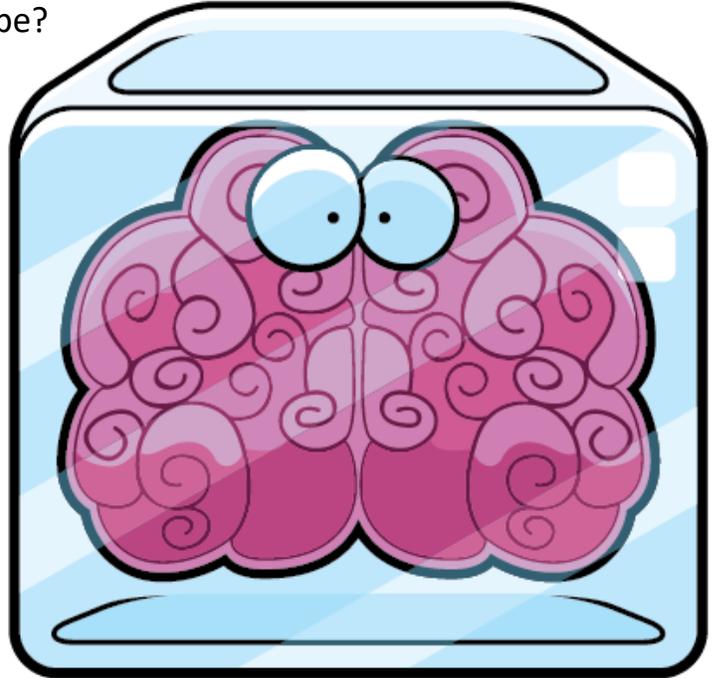
QUICK TIP: UNFREEZE YOUR BRAIN

Feel like your brain is stuck in a frozen cube?

Remember, you can use story cubes to help you craft plot twists for your tale! Just pick a couple of dice at random, roll 'em, and interpret the symbols as you see fit. Rinse and repeat until your story reaches a fitting conclusion.

Story dice won't change the way you write, except to sometimes make it faster and easier to come up with interesting descriptions & plot events/twists on the fly. They won't overload you with information or draw attention away from the story. They're designed to give you just enough information to nudge your creativity and

keep things varied and lively as you build your plot.



PLOTS, POPS, AND TWISTS

Practical Steps to Making Your Story 'Pop!' for older writers

1. ELIMINATE THE OBVIOUS

When coming up with the climax to your story, discard every possible solution you can think of for your protagonist to succeed. Discard them.

Then think of some more.

And discard those, too.

You're trying to create an ending that's so unforeseen that if a million people read your story, not one of them would guess how it ends (or how it will get to the end), but when they finally come to it, every one of those people would think, *Yes! That makes perfect sense! Why didn't I see that coming?*

The more impossible the climax is for your protagonist to overcome, the more believable and inevitable the escape or solution needs to be. No reader should anticipate it, but everyone should nod and smile when it happens. No one guesses, everyone nods. That's what you're shooting for.

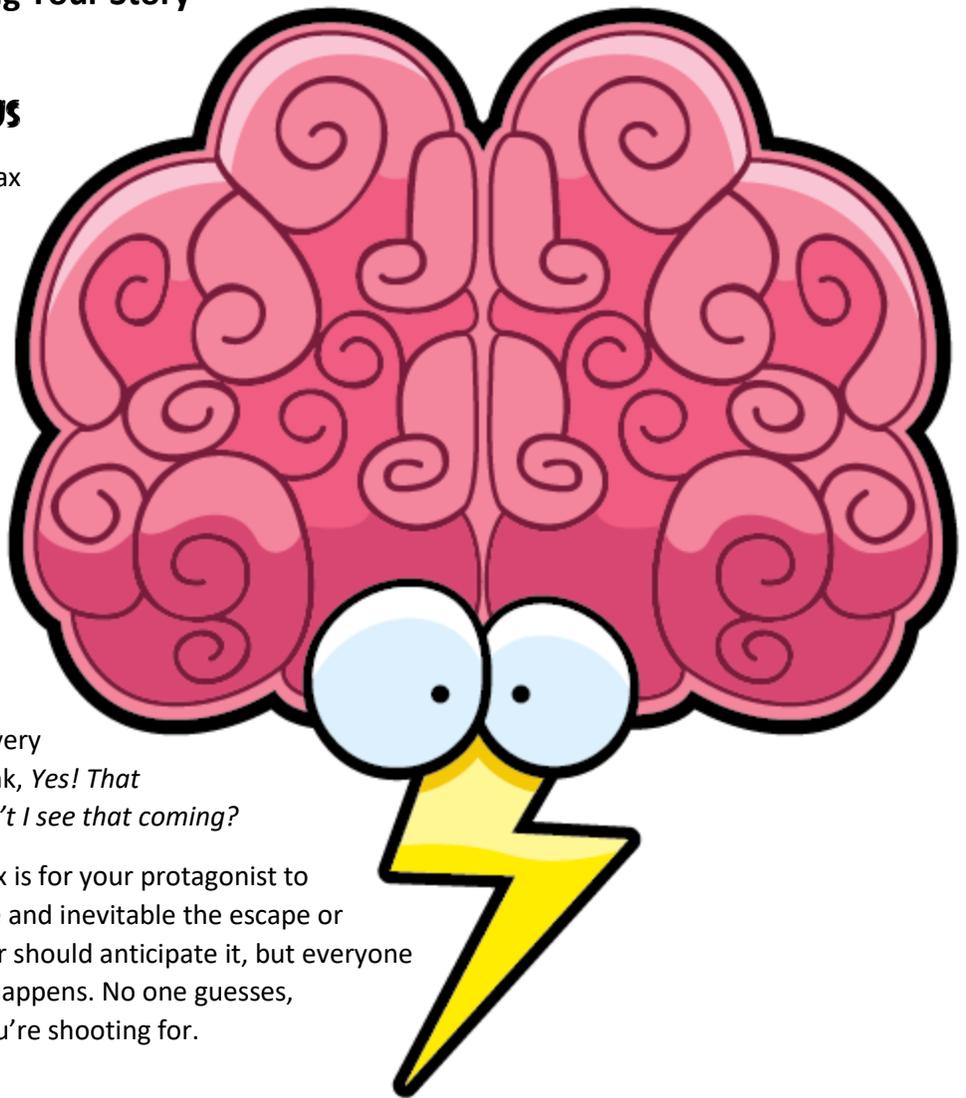
2. REDIRECT SUSPICION

When you work on your narrative, constantly ask yourself what readers are expecting and hoping for at this moment in the story. Then keep twisting the story into new directions that both shock and delight them.

To keep readers from noticing clues, bury them in the emotion or action of another section. For example, in an adventure novel, offhandedly mention something during a chase scene, while readers' attention is on the action, not the revelation. Use red herrings, dead ends, and foils. Bury clues in discussions of something else.

WHILE WRITING, ASK YOURSELF:

How can I do a better job of burying the clues readers need to have in order to accept the ending? Where do I need to bring those clues to the surface?



How can I play expectations based on genre conventions against readers to get them to suspect the wrong person as the villain or antagonist?

3. AVOID GIMMICKS

Readers want their emotional investment to pay off. The twist should never occur in a way that makes them feel tricked, deceived, or insulted. Great twists always deepen, never cheapen, readers' investment in the story.

This is why dream sequences typically don't work—the protagonist thinks she's in a terrible mess, then wakes up and realizes it was all just a dream. These aren't twists because they almost never escalate the story but often do the very opposite, revealing to readers that things weren't really that bad after all (de-escalation). Showing a character experiencing a harrowing or frightening experience and then having him wake up from a dream is not a twist; it's a tired cliché.

How do you solve this? Simply tell the reader it's a dream beforehand. It can be just as frightening without de-escalating the story's tension, and it can also end in a way that's not predictable.

WHILE WRITING, ASK YOURSELF:

Will readers feel tricked, deceived, or insulted by this twist? If so, how can I better respect their ability to guess the ending of my story?

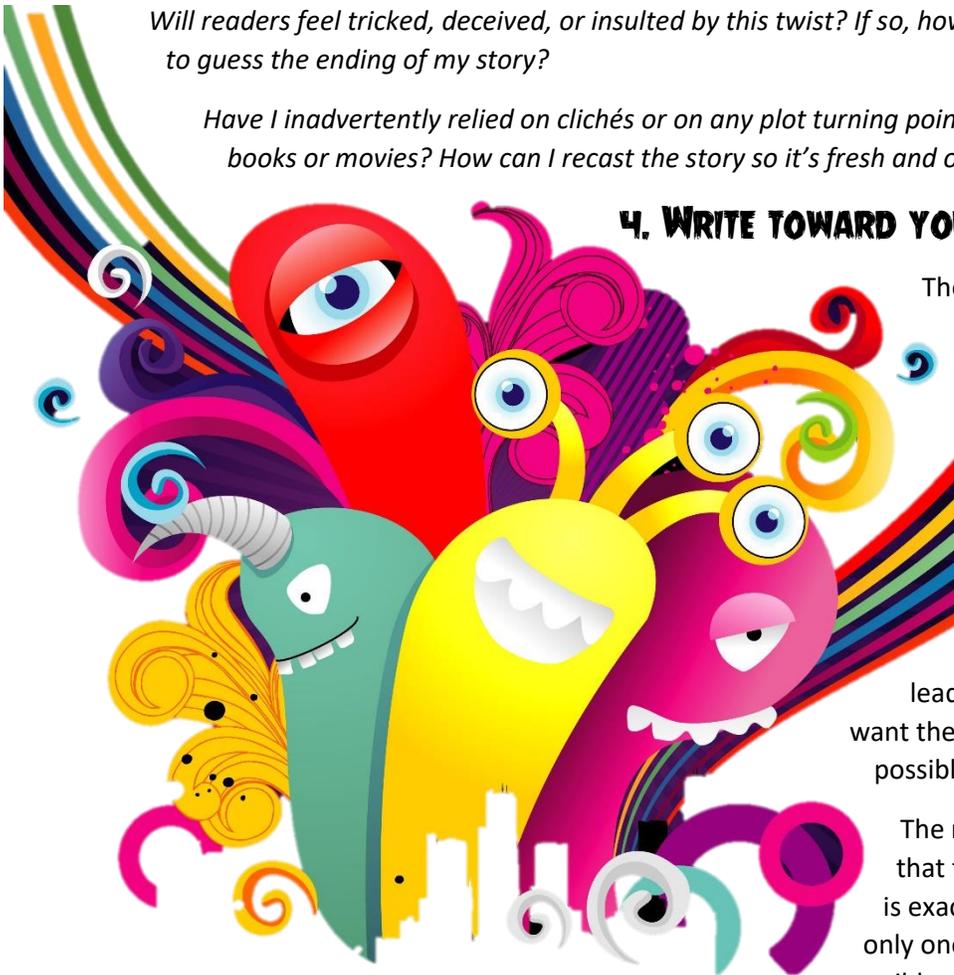
Have I inadvertently relied on clichés or on any plot turning points that have appeared in other books or movies? How can I recast the story so it's fresh and original?

4. WRITE TOWARD YOUR READERS' REACTION.

The way you want your readers to respond will determine the way you set up your twist. Three different types of twists all result in different reactions by readers: (1) "No way!" (2) "Huh. Nice!" and (3) "Oh, yeah!"

When aiming for the "No way!" response, you'll want to lead readers into *certainty*. You want them to think that there's only one possible solution to the story.

The more you can convince them that the story world you've portrayed is exactly as it appears to be—that only one outcome to the novel is possible—the more you'll make their jaws



drop when you show them that things were not as they appeared to be at all. If the twist is satisfying, credible, and inevitable based on what has preceded it, readers will gasp and exclaim, “No way! That’s awesome! I can’t believe he got that one past me.”

With the “Huh. Nice!” ending, you want to lead readers into *uncertainty*. Basically, they’ll be thinking, “Man, I have no idea where this is going.” When writing for this response, you’ll create an unbalanced, uncertain world. You don’t want readers to suspect only one person as the villain but many people. Only when the true villain is revealed will readers see that everything was pointing in that direction all along.

Finally, if you’re shooting for the “Oh, yeah!” reaction, you’ll want to emphasize the *cleverness* with which the main character gets out of the seemingly impossible-to-escape-from climax. Often we do that by allowing him to use a special gift, skill, or emblem that has been shown to readers earlier but that they aren’t thinking about when they reach the climax. Then, when the protagonist pulls it out, readers remember: “Yes! That’s right! He carries a can of shark repellent in his wetsuit! I forgot all about that!”

Relentlessly escalate your story while keeping it believable, surprising, and deeper than it appears.

WHILE WRITING, ASK YOURSELF:

If I want to shock readers with the twist, have I led them into certainty as they try to predict the ending?

If I want readers to suspect a number of different endings, have I satisfactorily built up all the potential outcomes?

*If I want readers to cheer at the ending, have I (1) created a seemingly impossible situation for the protagonist to escape from or conquer or (2) allowed the protagonist to persevere through wit or grit rather than with the help of someone else (that is, *deus ex machina*)?*

SAMPLE SUPPLY LIST LESSON TEN

LESSON MATERIALS

- Selected picture books
- Post-it notes
- Rough drafts from Lesson Nine, with review notes from the instructor, for each co-authorship
- Completed Plot Elements Plans for each co-authorship from Lesson Eight
- Opening Line Ideas from Lesson Seven for each co-authorship
- Completed Vivid Verbiage Word Banks for each pair from Lesson Six
- Pencils
- Writing Paper
- Completed settings for each co-authorship
- Completed characters for each co-authorship
- Story ideas from the dice sessions for each co-authorship
- Story Dice, just in case!

PACING GUIDE:

THIS LESSON HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO TAKE ONE TO TWO 75-MINUTE SESSIONS TO COMPLETE.

MAKE SURE TO GIVE YOUR STUDENTS [AND YOURSELF] ENOUGH TIME TO TRULY FLESH OUT THE ROUGH DRAFTS AND INCORPORATE SEVERAL PLOT TWISTS INTO THEIR STORIES. THIS PROCESS MAY TAKE MORE OR LESS TIME DEPENDING ON THE NEEDS OF YOUR CLASSROOM AND THE ABILITIES OF YOUR STUDENTS.