

This, the first essay in this series, is about “Establishing Authority.” Once you establish your authority, you can take the reader anywhere. The reader will trust you, believe you, and you can do anything with the plot.

This authority is arguably the most important part of starting your story.

The two most effective ways – that I use – to establish authority are:

Honesty and frankness.

Or demonstrating knowledge.

Heart versus Head.

In the first method (as demonstrated in the preceding essay) you risk revealing something that makes you look bad. You allow yourself to become the fool instead of the hero. And by doing so, you allow your reader to risk becoming involved, emotionally involved, in your story. In a way, your honesty proves to the reader that the story will not be about proving your glory. You admit your failures and weakness, and doing so lets your reader admit and accept their own. You prove a story – and life – *doesn't have to be about looking good*.

The second method for establishing authority is through knowledge: Prove to your reader that you've done your research. That your narrator is the best, most-qualified person to tell this story. This method won't engage the reader emotionally, not like the Honesty method, but it can be impressive and compelling.

To illustrate, the story above is the Heart Method.

This essay that follows is more the Head Method.

Emotion versus Intellect.

In my book *Survivor*, Chapter 46 is the Heart Method. It shows how the narrator is running a fake suicide hotline in order to meet people as damaged as himself. But Chapter 44 – with its chorus of obscure household hints – is the Head Method.

Again, the Heart Method impresses the reader with honesty and vulnerability.

The Head Method impresses the reader with its knowledge.

You could argue that Stephen King uses the Heart Method mainly. The way each character is introduced, slowly and carefully, to prompt the reader into bonding and feeling sympathy. It's not often you run across dense thickets of statistics and facts, insider knowledge and data in a Stephen King novel.

Among my favorite books, *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson has moments of such brutal, unflattering honesty, that I will read it again and again. And feel shocked and touched each time.

You could also argue that Tom Clancy uses the Head Method. The way military and government procedures and technology are used to assure a reader that the protagonist is smart and trained – and therefore worth spending time with. This includes wonderful insider, jargon-y language. Another form of impressing the reader with knowledge.

Among my favorite books, *Ill Nature* by Joy Williams is filled with such a burden of horrible data about the destruction of the natural world, that reading it is addictive.

Craig Clevenger's book, *The Contortionist's Handbook*, also uses a wealth of information to establish the narrator's authority as a forger – a criminal so adept at his job that we can forgive his crimes because we're so impressed by his obsessive, methodical work habits and skill.

Still – Heart or Head – both methods establish the writer or narrator's authority. They engage the reader, and help prove the authenticity of the story.

With authority in mind, this series of essays is not the perfect way to write fiction. This is only what works for me. So, please, take or leave anything you read here. If it helps, use it. If not, thank you for considering my view.

This isn't about you, the author, looking good. Or me looking good. This is about serving the reader with your most effective storytelling. Over the next year, this series of essays will cover a few basic rules that I wish someone had taught me in my first writing workshop. A few rules that – if applied – will make your writing tighter, more immediate and more effective.

There are other possible ways to establish your authority. The most popular is being Clever. But after a few minutes, you can tell cleverness is someone hiding. Someone scared and dishonest and trying to distract you from the truth of anything that matters. We all know glib, silly people like that and it's amazing how fast their banter can become tedious and cruel. Maybe for short stretches, clever is entertaining, but it won't convince the reader to suspend their disbelief and follow you anywhere.

Another method to establish authority is to just bully the reader. To constantly tell the reader how to feel, how to react. To spoon feed the reader every thought and insight. If you provide the reader with every thought, soon they won't be able to think and might trust you completely. This is that bland, third-person, voice-of-God writing you see so much. But, God, that kind of story can get boring.

Another method is to charm, but again – even the loveliest, most lyrical language gets boring after a few paragraphs. It still becomes a hero story, because it showcases the writing and the writer. Before that point, you need to make something interesting happen. Convey concrete information.

So, for now, let's concentrate on establishing authority with either Heart or Head methods.

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