

9 Elements of a Great Book

Article by Mary Carroll Moore

Before You Send Out Your Manuscript, Be Sure These are in Place

According to National Public Radio, 291,000 books were released in 2006. That's up from 172,000 in 2005. Seems like everyone wants to write a book. But so many books get unread, unseen, unloved by the readers who could enjoy them. Most people who set out to write a book never do. Why?

Because unlike writing a story, poem, essay, or article, completing a book-length manuscript takes real stamina.

Compare it to a marriage-versus a blind date. You have to work on the relationship, you have to have persistence and belief in what you're doing. And in today's competitive publishing arena, books demand more upfront time — even with novels, first-time authors need to know their “platform,” or why the book is unique and publishable and will sell copies for its publisher. It demands getting to know the book concept, even planning and exploring that concept long before the first draft.

Few good books nowadays are written by someone just sitting down at the computer and letting it rip. (Unless they have already written 10 books and know how to do it.)

Over my years of teaching over 2,000 writers how to plan, write, and develop a book, I've distilled nine elements that every book must contain to succeed. These are things the writer may not be conscious of during the first draft or even during early revision of their manuscript. But by the end of the process, before they start submitting it, they need to have these elements in place. They are:

1. A solid premise
2. A compelling triggering moment or need (established early) — something that makes the reader want to keep reading
3. A single visual concept or image that evokes theme and repeats or echoes throughout the manuscript
4. A believable location in time and space
5. Real stories
6. A good balance of showing and telling
7. Some crisis to be overcome, a crisis the reader will care about
8. Some resolution or lesson learned
9. Universality — so the reader gets why this book is pertinent to her life, not just the writer's

What do these mean, and how can you achieve them?

Premise. The premise is a one-sentence statement that describes your book's outer story and its inner meaning. Remember “Dorothy travels to the magical land of Oz and discovers there's no

place like home”)? The premise for the book (and movie) *The Wizard of Oz* describes the entire story, very clearly and in an engaging way. Premises are also called focus statements or tag lines, and they often appear on the book’s cover, are used as subtitles, or become part of the query letter to agents. A premise should have compelling, well-edited language — and a twist, if possible, to make us curious. (For instance, why should Dorothy love home more after her journey into magic?)

Triggering Moment. Something starts your story — it establishes the reason to keep reading. Often, though, the writer feels he must give us tons of background to make the triggering moment make sense. Not true. The opening event — without which the book would not exist — must happen sooner now because the reader’s attention span is shorter. What is the triggering event in your book? What is the moment when the need your book will address is expressed and demonstrated? The trigger lays out the meat of the conflict of your story. It’s the hook, it delivers the main characters’ obstacles, it presents the most important thesis. Mostly, it tells us about the struggle. There’s always a struggle in literature, a struggle between people or people and an ideal or countries at war or the need to lose weight and the obstacles to do so. Note: The trigger must occur within the first 20 pages (since these are the sample pages that an agent will see and determine the worth of your book).

Single Visual Concept. Most modern literature contains theme — a deeper meaning. We’re a reading culture that searches for meaning and we want to be changed and enlivened by what we read (or we want to escape with great fun and passion — as in entertainment literature). Theme is presented via a single repeating visual or senses-rich image. This introduces and develops the inner story, the lesson learned or the goal achieved or lost. For instance, a box of letters that is searched for throughout the story and represented the losses between two family members.

Location in Time and Space. All books happen somewhere — whether they are fiction, memoir, or nonfiction. For example, a book about children with disabilities — maybe a self-help book — must have a location where the children can show us their disabilities. Location is not just physical setting — it can also be an emotional or intellectual setting, sometimes called the container of the story. We, as readers, pick up meaning through this container, and it’s often as important to us as the message the book is delivering. In fact, the container often delivers much of the message. Example: A war-torn village is a container for a story about rivalry among siblings. The village’s experience with war echoes the more personal enmity.

Real Stories. Witness the amazing success of anthologies (*Chicken Soup for the Soul*) — those little books of small stories. We are a story-loving culture. Memoirs are snapshots of a life, i.e., stories. Novels are a long series of real stories, even though they are imagined. Nonfiction delivers information, history, or experience via engaging anecdotes. Don’t forget your stories. We learn most easily through them because we are captivated.

Balance of Showing and Telling. Instead of telling us all you know about baseball, put us on the baseball field on the first barely warm spring day and let us hear the crack of the bat, the muffled thud of a ball finding a mitt. Evoke the senses and setting and place us in real time with people, and we will follow you anywhere. Yes, it’s the old writing rule “Show, don’t tell,” but both elements must appear in your book in a balance appropriate to your genre.

A Crisis We Care About. If you have a group of people sitting around a kitchen table, drinking coffee and talking through their outrage about a divorce, I am less likely to really feel this conflict than if you place me in a moment with the two exes. Let me see the characters embroiled in the conflict of their lives, where their beliefs, values, or livelihood is actually threatened. Learn to write crisis, palpable ones — and get people out of the kitchen!

Resolution or Lesson Learned. Books don't have to end with tidy moments! But there must be movement. Something must be resolved, learned, rejected, or realized — even if it is the “back-to-where-we-started” realization that a character is helpless in the face of her own loss. What's the end of your book going to show us about the change and movement of your story, the application of your method?

Universality. Universality is that moment when a reader says, “Wow, this is like me,” or “You're writing my story” — even if the circumstances are completely different. There's a sense of common language, of common humanity, in good books. Once universality is addressed, the reader gets why your book is pertinent to her life, not just the writer's. Ask yourself: Why should the reader care about your story?

Test your understanding of these nine elements by reading as a writer. Pick up two or three of your favorite books in the same genre you're writing. Go through the list of nine elements and try to score each writer. Did each address these? Why do you care about the story or topic? What was most compelling?

A good book might make you stay up all night reading. At the least, it should linger with you for days after you finish it. Creating such compelling literature is always part mystery and grace, but it's also part craft. There are specific elements — nine of them — that will take you a long ways toward understanding what makes a good book, and writing it.

Exercise to Explore the Nine Elements

1. Gather two or three of your favorite books (ideally in the same genre you like to write). Go through each, nine elements list in hand. How does each writer address them?
2. Make a list of your current strengths as a writer. What do you do well and naturally? Where do you have good skills? Compare this list to the nine elements.
3. List any areas you still need skill development — areas where you lack confidence, perhaps. Treat this list matter-of-factly, and try not to be discouraged as you write what's missing in your writing toolbox.
4. Now choose one or two of these areas that need work. Set a kitchen timer for 10 minutes and freewrite or list any resources you know of — people who might help you, classes you could take, mentors you could hire, good writing books you have heard about — anything which will help you get started.
5. This week take one positive step toward skill building. Explore one of the nine elements and see how your new learning affects your book.

Mary Carroll Moore is the published author of over 300 articles, short stories, poems, and columns and 12 nonfiction books in memoir, how-to, medical, food and health, and inspirational

genres; her novel will be published in 2009. She teaches book writing at the Hudson Valley Writers Center, The Loft Literary Center, The Studios at Key West, Borders Books' Author Series, and American Penwomen.