

Writing is a question of finding a certain rhythm - Françoise Sagan

The Third Degree – professional, inexpensive appraisal to help you discover your writer’s voice.

Sometimes new writers need help discovering their unique writer’s voice before submitting a work for a major assessment or appraisal . The ***Third Degree*** takes just a small sample of a manuscript and concentrates on the author’s personal writing style or writer’s voice.

Rather than giving an exhaustive, detailed and expensive critique of an entire manuscript, we take say 3,000-5,000 words, and focus on aspects of style rather than structure. Using Windows tracking software, editorial comments and suggested changes to the text are highlighted for the author to see clearly where improvements could be made. Carried over to the entire manuscript, these suggestions can result in major improvements in the work. (see sample below)

The process is suitable for most forms of creative writing including stories, novels, memoirs, magazine articles, essays, blogs or journals.

An author can then return to subsequent drafts of their work confident that their writing voice is the best one for the job.

Fees for a ***Third Degree*** appraisal start at \$50.00 for a standard detailed report covering the following considerations:

- the choice of writing ***style*** (humorous, childlike, breezy, authoritative) - is it the best one for the project’s potential audience?
- the story’s ***point of view*** - is the narrator a character in the story or a detached observer? How much distance should the storyteller maintain from the events and characters in the story?
- ***tense*** - would present tense bring a compelling immediacy to the work or would past tense be the better choice, gradually building dramatic tension as the story unfolds?
- the choice of narrator’s ***voice*** - is the voice of the writer too opinionated? too flippant? too pushy? too cold? Is there too much slang? Could a change of voice introduce new insights and interests?
- does the ***punctuation, syntax, spelling, formatting*** meet publishing standards?

- does the *dialogue* sound natural, convincing? Does it help the momentum of the story and the characterisations or is it just unnecessary padding?
- is the *meaning* of the writing clear and unambiguous? Are the underlying themes sufficiently illustrated?
- Is the *pace* of the story too fast or too slow? Is it appropriate for the genre? Does it contribute to dramatic tension?

Samples of a typical *Third Degree* appraisal report –

Sample 1

At the funeral she walked as a noble, ~~honourable~~ bearer ~~;~~ tall, though drained by grief ~~and sorrow~~. A rising sun ~~warmed~~ ~~bathed~~ us ~~warmly~~ on the grass-downed knoll as we who knew him best dug the hole. Surrounding the hill, thousands stood in silence, observing us create the wound in Astra's soil and put

Wolfsword's body back into her, unclothed and unbound, just as he was when he came into our mother's hands bawling that dawn twenty seven-years ago. I

found comfort in the prospect of the deep brown earth cradling his body like a dark mother, preparing to unmake and share the essence of his flesh to sustain other life, ~~as she shared the essences of other life to sustain him~~.

Sparrowshaft had chosen a red cedar to be planted on his grave. ~~It~~ Already it shoots upwards toward its future glory: a beautiful tree and a fitting memorial to a fine king and family, ~~who devoted their lives to serving our~~ people.

Feedback

This author tends to overdo the descriptive passages, often inserting more adjectives than necessary and explaining things a little too much. These are habits which easily slip beneath a writer's radar and can indicate a lack of confidence in the writing, something that is very quickly remedied when brought to their attention.

Sample 2

It was ~~four o'clock on a~~ Saturday afternoon and I decided it was time to look through the newspaper in the hope of finding a new job.

"Hey! There's an advertisement in the paper for a nanny," I told Mel as I continued reading ~~the ad~~. "~~I think~~ I might apply."

"That sounds interesting," Mel responded ~~enthusiastically~~. "I'm not very good with kids, but you are." ~~She~~ Mel raised her eyebrows and nodded ~~optimistically~~. "Where is it?" ~~she asked~~.

"Camberwell," I replied. "I'm ~~gonna~~ ~~ll~~ go call them now." And with that, I disappeared into my bedroom, with the ~~mobile~~ ~~portable~~ phone in my hand.

About fifteen minutes later I returned to the lounge room to find Mel and Simon occupying both couches. ~~They were~~, watching *Burke's Backyard*.

"What are you two watching this crap for?" ~~I asked as I entered the room~~.

"Nothing else to do," Simon said sleepily.

"Let's celebrate!" I shouted, before literally jumping on top of Simon and giving him a big cuddle, pinning his arms down so he couldn't move them. "I just got a job as a nanny!"

~~Simon and Mel~~ ~~They~~ both sat up ~~straight~~ and congratulated me. I was thankful that Melanie didn't care ~~that~~ I would be leaving Zagames. After I told them all the details of where and when I would be working, we agreed to celebrate properly ~~as a group~~. In other words, any excuse for a piss up! I still had half a bottle of Johnnie Red in the cupboard and Simon said he would go up the street and buy himself a slab of VB. Just as ~~Simon~~ ~~he~~ was about to leave he made a passing comment about Damon and Luke possibly dropping in.

Feedback

The first person style, as used in this story, brings the reader in nice and close to the action. Readers feel they are right there with the main character getting a first-hand account. But this close-up style can also give the narrator too much control, making the story a little one-dimensional. Everything ends up being filtered through the main character's consciousness. In the above sample we don't know what Simon or Mel are thinking or why they react the way they do. Redrafting this story in the third person would more than likely result in greater depth of character and a more engaging read.

Mentoring

At its simplest level, a mentorship is a relationship between a writer who has significant experience with publication in his or her field, and one relatively new to the process. Depending on the outcome required, the two work together to develop a series of goals, and work towards them, with the more experienced writer lending his or her support, advice and critique.

A testimonial (first published by The Hunter Writers Centre)

In my case, the goal was a very specific one—to turn my rough draft into a polished manuscript ready for submission to agents and publishers.

I sent out the first chapter, a query and synopsis to the mentors on my shortlist, and judged them from the responses, which varied quite dramatically. I felt an immediate symbiosis with Greg Bastian, whose response was measured, thoughtful, and showed that he had read through the chapter carefully. While he didn't underplay the amount of work required, he was also very positive about the work's potential.

Once Greg and I agreed to work with one another, it was simply a matter of getting together, working out a plan and following that plan through. Since both of us are disciplined, motivated and responsive, the work progressed at a rapid pace, and after six rewrites of chapter one (at which point Greg told me we were halfway through the mentorship), we were able to somehow work through the rest of the novel with only a single re-write of each chapter, until we had reached a mutually agreed quality level.

The work was intensive, and involved a line by line rework, with each sentence checked for its value to the overall novel, each character tested, reworked, and fleshed out wherever necessary, and uneven plot points ironed out. By the time we were finished, Greg and I agreed that the work was ready for submission and that we had created a much more dynamic, integrated, and well paced novel, without impacting on the overall theme, the overall storyline, or the overall integrity of the work.

As a mentor, Greg Bastian was excellent—thorough and uncompromising, but always mindful of what I was trying to achieve with my writing.

Magdalena Ball

www.compulsivereader.com

NB: Maggie's novel has since been accepted for publication in 2007